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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

July  
1995

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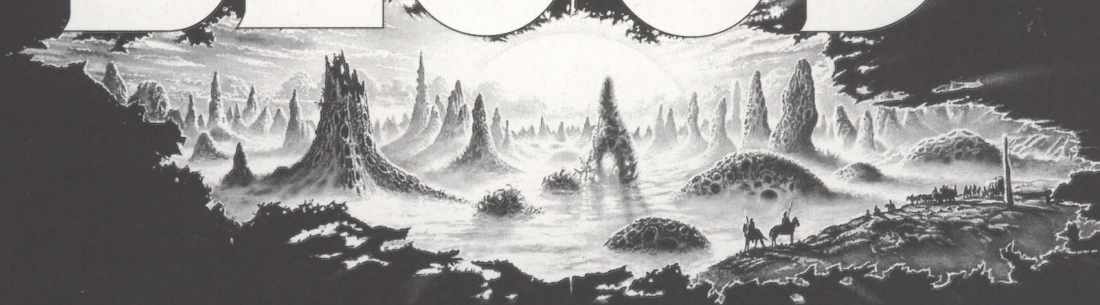


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# interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 97

July 1995

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# Interaction

Dear Editors:

I've just received my first copy of *Interzone*, the culmination of more than a year of searching. I knew you were out there somewhere, because I kept finding traces in short-story collections, those "first published in *Interzone*" credits...

So I went down to my local large chain of newsagents and had a look – nothing. I found plenty of fascinating stuff, ten different magazines for the golf bore, as much porn as I wanted, and even a magazine for users of routing machines called, yes, you've guessed it, *Routing*. So, like the fool I am, I asked that nice spotty youth at the counter, "Do you stock *Interzone*?" He looked blankly at me and said, "ya wha?" I said, "It's a science-fiction magazine," and he replied in a slightly

disgusted voice that they didn't do "that sort of thing," and offered me a copy of *Paedophile News*. I bought it, so he wouldn't think I was a sick weirdo, and left.

Then, in the back of a paperback from the library, I found your standard advert. It was a few years old and asked the reader to send one pound, six shillings and tuppence in gold to the address below. It was so old I thought I'd better make sure you were still there, so I noted the address and decided to check with Directory Enquiries. They told me you didn't exist.

So I assumed that, like all other science-fiction magazines published in this country, you'd gone bankrupt. But then, while browsing in my local bookshop among the endless reprints of Asimov and all those tedious horror books, I found a paperback with a very recent advert of yours in the back. You still existed! So I sent my cheque, and here I am. Better sign off now, as I've got a busy day ahead – a round of golf and some routing to do.

**Francis O'Regan**  
*Didcot, Oxon.*

**Editor:** *The above sounds like a tall story to us, but it carries the ever-green moral that persistence pays off.*

Dear Editors:

Please don't reduce the number of reviews. *Interzone* is the only commercial magazine to regularly review sf and fantasy in this country. Even if some of the reviewers make me gnash my teeth, at least they write at length and from an informed point of view. Another plus is the attention given from time to time to authors such as A. S. Byatt, Adam Lively, etc. If only the mainstream press would be as generous with sf reviews.

The author interviews are always fascinating. I also appreciated the

"Ortygia" sequence in *IZ* 88 – I had never realized there had been this nest of budding of budding sf writers in West London. And as for David Langford – well, Langford is uniquely Langford; great stuff!

In a recent *Locus* there were some disturbing figures about *Interzone*'s circulation numbers dropping, and the loss of the larger Arts Council grant. I hope these are temporary hitches and that this doesn't have wider implications for the future of *IZ*. In spite of any moans (and we all love to moan) it's still a great magazine.

**Sarah Ash**  
*Beckenham, Kent*

**Editor:** *Rumours have been heard that Interzone has "lost its Arts Council grant" and is in danger of ceasing publication. Not so: we have an ongoing grant of more than £4,000 per annum. Issue 98 is being typeset at the moment, good material for issue 99 is in hand, and we are preparing a splendid issue 100. Also planned is a special J. G. Ballard issue, to coincide with his long-awaited non-fiction collection A User's Guide to the Millennium in early 1996. What may have started the gloomy rumours is my comment in certain quarters that we have suffered "withdrawal symptoms" from the Arts Council's generous Incentive Funding grants received in 1991-93. Because some of the newer subscribers, gained through the two subscription drives paid for by that Incentive Funding, have now flaked away, our subscription list is lower than it was a year or two ago. But we owe not a penny to the bank (and never have done, in 13 years of publication) and are confident of overcoming this temporary slump. Publishing Interzone has always been a tough slog, financially, and it no doubt always will be. We soldier*

## Price Rise

The price rise from this issue, to £2.75 a copy, is our first since number 67 in January 1993. That's two and a half years ago. As ever, we regret the necessity for the increase but trust that readers will understand that inflation has not gone away entirely. Particularly worrisome of late have been the galloping increases in paper prices, a worldwide phenomenon which has affected other magazines everywhere – see, for example, the recent reports of *Omni*'s difficulties ("Omni Ceases Monthly Publication," *Locus*, April 1995). Luckily, the paper-cost hikes show signs of bottoming out now, but they have been savage while they have lasted.

The up-side of the paper crisis is that, since we were obliged to pay more anyway, our printer was able to find a more attractive paper stock for *Interzone*. The magazine is now printed on a "matte art" paper which bulks 20 per cent thicker for the same weight, has a pleasant "satin" finish and is less reflective. This change took effect from the last issue, number 96, and we hope that you like the result.

**David Pringle**



on, and point to our 13 years and 97 issues as proof that we mean business. Other plans are being laid for boosting the magazine. It's onwards and upwards to the year 2001!

Dear Editors:

In IZ 93 you ended the letter column by asking for the top ten books of someone who has been reading science fiction for five years or less. Well, I am 14 and have been reading it for only three years. Consequently, my personal favourites are mostly recent:

*The Memory of Earth* by Orson Scott Card. This is the first and best book of the "Homecoming" series, but only just: the other two I've read are both very strong.

*Akira* by Katsuhiro Otomo. This is actually manga, but anyone who enjoys hard sf will love it. Unfortunately, no other biting-action manga can seem to match it.

*The Committed Men* by M. John Harrison. The story's appeal is that the characters are particularly tragic. I feel life will never be the same again...

*Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson. Funny, full of violence and good descriptions. In parts it's confusing, but all the way through it's brilliant.

*Glory Season* by David Brin. At first I thought I was going to be bored stupid, but suddenly the description faded away to reveal hard action.

*The Lost King* by Margaret Weis. I reckon I enjoyed this because the story line is very close to *Star Wars*. It was good enough for me to buy the rest of the series.

*Wolf Pack* by Robert N. Charrette. I only read this for the mecha, and was surprised when I really enjoyed it.

*TekLords* by William Shatner. This novel is excellent, but it's a pity his others have been so bad.

*Thorn and Needle* by Paul B. Thompson. Whether this is fantasy or science fiction is debatable. That

it's excellent cannot be denied.

*Use of Weapons* by Iain M. Banks. Unfortunately, I can only admit to enjoying the odd scene, but the ones that are good are really good...

**Alex Sehmer**  
Guildford, Surrey

**Editor:** A 14-year-old after our own hearts. We admire your eclecticism; when I was around your age I was reading Edgar Rice Burroughs one day and J. G. Ballard the next, Poul Anderson in the morning and Vladimir Nabokov in the evening. This is normal, I like to think!

Dear Editors:

I usually find Nick Lowe's "Mutant Popcorn" a fairly accurate guide, but I'm afraid the review of *Star Trek: Generations* (Interzone 95) is full of errors easily spotted by any regular viewer of the series:

- 1) We did meet Picard's brother and his wife, and their son, four years ago.
- 2) Data's emotion chip has a long history, which I won't go into. Shame he decided to use it.
- 3) Worf has already been promoted twice.
- 4) Wesley Crusher left four years ago (thankfully).

Perhaps Nick Lowe should watch all 179 episodes before the next film comes out. I've got one more to watch.

Anyway, I'm renewing my subscription. I loved the layout of Charles Platt's *Interzone* 94, by the way. While I'm writing, here's my top ten sf novels or series (no *Star Trek* books!), not necessarily in order:

Anne McCaffrey's "Dragon" sagas.

Douglas Adams's "Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy" trilogy.

James White's "Sector General" stories.

L. Ron Hubbard's *Battlefield Earth*.

Cordwainer Smith's *Norstrilia* and related stories.

Robert Jordan's "Wheel of Time" series.

Asimov's "Robot" stories and novels.

Douglas Hill's "Last Legionary Quartet."

Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama*.

John Wyndham's *Day of the Triffids*.

**Gareth Jones**  
Harlow, Essex

**Editor:** We received several complaints about that Nick Lowe column (see the following letter). I sometimes think that TV series like *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (and its associated spinoff books) are the exact modern equivalent of the old pulp-magazine series – there are 179 ST:TNG episodes, there were 181 "Doc Savage" novellas; and each has, or had, their fandom. As to your top-ten listing, it's the most unashamedly populist we have received to date (does that say something about *Star Trek* fans?). It's good to see the names of Douglas Hill, Cordwainer Smith and James White in there; but the gorge rises a bit at the mention of Hubbard's *Battlefield Earth* – are you serious?

Dear Editors:

If a reviewer wants to try and sound clever, he should get his facts right. Therefore, by way of punishment, I suggest Nick Lowe be forced to sit through all those episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* in which Picard's brother and sister-in-law are mentioned or featured. (Besides, it was his brother and nephew who were killed.)

As to the Tarkovsky comparisons, I'd be surprised if the makers of the movie *Generations* have even heard of *Solaris*, let alone seen it. Personally, I'd put the similarities down to coincidence – and not a particularly remarkable coincidence at that.

**Paul Beardsley**  
Havant, Hants





**F**rom the first time they walked into the office, the couple worried me. I don't like to think that their designer clothing and expensive perfume triggered a residual lower-middle-class resentment in me. I'd rather believe it was the little indentation between Arlene Dunnett's eyebrows and the slight petulance of her husband Sterling's lips that told me here are two people who always get what they want – or almost always. “Kitty Nygano, personal assistant to Dr Branson,” I said, introducing myself at the door. They hardly looked at me, but focused their attention on Hildegard. As the person the media constantly proclaims “the greatest woman scientist of the 21st century,” she commands attention.

The Dunnetts had made the appointment. I was hoping that they wanted to give a large donation to the Institute, but they didn't look to me like people about to open their wallets. Hildegard was sitting where I'd told her to, behind the desk of her circular office, wearing her white lab coat as I had suggested she do when meeting with potential donors. Her

wild white hair framed by a magnificent view of the ocean through the window behind her. I was seated beside her, but I could also see the rough dark surface of the water – three-quarters of the walls were glass. Arlene and Sterling sat on the sofa, Sterling fidgeting with the cuff buttons on his jacket – which, I noticed, had real buttonholes that could be fastened and unfastened – and Arlene sitting slightly forward, just as if she were about to present her case to a jury. She was a lawyer, she'd told me, and Sterling an architect. I'd done a quick background check; they were rich.

“Dr Branson,” Arlene said, “I deeply admire your work.”

Hildegard murmured something unintelligible; she claims she doesn't notice praise, but I know otherwise.

“We've come to you about a personal problem. We're going to have a child” – my eyes dropped to her waistline but nothing was showing yet; she couldn't be very far along – “and there's something





Illustrations by Russel Morgan

that only you can help us with. Something about the child's genes."

From the twitch that lifted Hildegard's eyebrow, I could tell this request made her slightly impatient.

"We believe our son is carrying – well, criminal tendencies."

Both of Hildegard's eyebrows were now raised. "I don't see why you've come here. I run a research institute, not a genetics consultancy service."

Arlene raised her hand, but bowed her head slightly, as if dealing with a difficult judge. "Of course we know that you're a world expert in the genetics of human brain development. But we've already been to an ordinary counsellor, and we've got the read-out here." She tapped the black briefcase beside her feet. "What he found has given us cause for concern. Our son has some of the genes associated with Attention Deficit Disorder, which as you know is more common in criminals than in the general population."

Ah-ha, I thought, this criminal business is just a

front – what they're really afraid of is having a child whose grades won't be good enough to get him into the Ivy League. Hildegard was playing with her light pen, rolling it between her fingers. "I know the genes you're talking about," she said. "But in the first place, a lot of people with ADD haven't got them, and furthermore most of the people with them have never been in trouble with the law. So I would say go home and don't worry about it."

Mr Dunnett opened his mouth for the first time. "It's because of Michael, you see, our first child. He died last year, and we don't want to go through that again."

In a surprisingly gentle tone, Hildegard asked, "How did he die?"

Mr Dunnett looked at his wife, but she bowed her head and wouldn't speak. "He was killed, shot by another teenager. It was revenge, because earlier that night Michael had shot at this boy. He missed him but the bullet hit the boy's ten-year-old sister. She was killed instantly. Her brother followed



Michael and killed him just outside our house. Michael was only 15."

Oh, the poor girl, I thought, and what had happened to their son to make him do a thing like that? Lines Arlene's make-up had skilfully concealed before were now standing out. "We don't want you to get the wrong idea, Dr Branson," she said, too hastily. "Our son was brought up in a beautiful home, in a good neighbourhood. He went to an excellent school – it was only after his death that we learned he'd gotten involved with a group of boys there who were interested in guns. I didn't work at all until he was five years old. Then he had a first-class nanny, not one of those immigrants who can barely speak English. He had everything a boy could want." There was a tissue in her hand and she crumpled it in her fist.

"But not too much," Mr Dunnett said, equally hastily. "We didn't spoil him, of course. We knew he was having trouble in school, was in danger of being expelled, but we didn't guess that he —"

"So that's why we think it must have been something in his genes," Arlene exclaimed. "Because of what my father was like."

When she didn't continue, her husband said, "Arlene's father spent most of his life in prison. He killed a bank clerk during a robbery."

"It was good he was put away," Mrs Dunnett said, continuing to crumple the tissue in her hand. "If he hadn't been, he probably would have killed my mother in one of his drunken rages." She looked at Hildegard, her blue eyes narrowed. "I knew I had to get out of that environment – that's why I worked so hard in school and went into law. That's why I married Sterling, who has nothing like that in his background. So the cause of Michael's problem must have been something he inherited from my father, because there was absolutely nothing in my son's environment to explain what happened to him."

I was shaken and a little embarrassed. Hildegard had let her pen lie still on her desk and was listening with attention, resting her hand on her chin. "Let me see the genetic profile of the foetus," she asked. I shook my head in a single gesture of *no*, but she chose to ignore me. Mrs Dunnett took a chip out of her briefcase and handed it to Hildegard. My boss put it in her computer and began scrolling through it, coiling a strand of hair behind her left ear around her forefinger as she often does when she's concentrating deeply on something. "Do you have profiles of your father and your first child?" she asked.

The Dunnetts exchanged glances. "No," Arlene said after a pause. "We were thinking of having one done of Michael when he started having trouble getting on in school. He was ten then, but we didn't go through with it – I think because we were afraid of what we might find out."

"Do you have any siblings, Mrs Dunnett?" Hildegard asked.

"Two sisters. One's a beautician and the other – well, she was in a car accident when she was small. Her brain was damaged and she's been in an institu-

tion ever since."

I was feeling guilty about my earlier hostility to Mrs Dunnett – much in her life had indeed been tragic. However, there was still something that disturbed me about the way she spoke of her son.

Hildegard looked up from the computer and said, "Well, I stand by my earlier advice. There's really no such thing as a 'criminal gene,' whatever the popular media may say. There are a number of alleles associated with learning difficulties here, but not enough to suggest that your son will inevitably have trouble in school. While those genes could be counteracted by supplying the missing neuro-transmitters, I'm afraid that wouldn't guarantee that this child would be law-abiding. Some very good students become criminals."

"But isn't there something like a gene for aggressiveness?" Mr Dunnett asked.

Hildegard began to coil her hair again and I saw a sudden spark in her brown eyes. "Well, the answer is no – and yes." She hit a few keys on her computer and I saw a pair of chromosomes come up on the screen: an X and a Y. "There is one gene very strongly associated with aggression, violence and crime" – she tapped the screen with her pen – "the only active gene on this chromosome, the one that makes a person male." She smiled, rather sardonically I thought, at Mr Dunnett.

"But the child's already been conceived," he said, rather plaintively. "Not that we planned it, we had thought we were infertile —"

"I admit I wouldn't be quite so worried if we were expecting a daughter," Mrs Dunnett said, bending slightly towards Dr Branson again. "But it's too late now."

"Not necessarily," Hildegard said, tilting her chair back and stretching out her legs in front of her. "There's something called 'androgen insensitivity syndrome.' It causes a male foetus to develop as a female because the male hormones can't bind to the receptor sites on the sex cells. We know how the gene that causes it works, so we could also induce it. The result would be what we call an XY woman."

"But surely no ethics committee would approve of such treatment," I said.

"Would such a person be a normal woman?" Mrs Dunnett asked.

"Well, the brain would develop like a female's, so she would feel like a woman, and the external genitalia would be completely female, but she wouldn't have ovaries or a uterus, and would need injections of female hormones after puberty to —"

Arlene held up her hand. "That's quite enough, Dr Branson. I don't want to have to tell my child that she's not a real woman because of some experiment her parents had carried out on her."

Hildegard touched her screen and the image of the paired chromosomes vanished. "Well, there is one other possibility. Based on my research, I think it's perfectly possible for a man to have a completely normal male body, but to have parts of the brain structured like a woman's so that he's less aggressive and more sensitive to the feelings of others, yet



still has normal male sexual orientation."

Oh no, not that obsession of hers again, I thought. And I wish she'd stop taking advantage of these two unhappy people. She ought to realize that she's proposing things that won't be permitted.

Mr Dunnett was still sitting, his shoulders slumped in his tweed jacket, his face unhappy, but Arlene's blue eyes had taken on a steely glint. "And such a person would be less likely to be a criminal?"

To my annoyance it only took Hildegard one keystroke to get the figures she wanted up on her screen. "Just look at the statistics – for every woman who appears before a criminal court, nine men do. And when you look at the violent crime numbers, the male bias is even greater, especially if you subtract the women who kill their husbands in self-defence."

Mrs Dunnett was nodding. She glanced at her husband, who was frowning at the carpet. "This is a very interesting proposal, Dr Branson – one we'd like to think over, if you don't mind."

"You're welcome to stay in the Institute's guest-house for several more days, if you want. And I could give you a most interesting tour of the labs," Hildegard said with a twinkle in her eye. I was shocked speechless that any parent would seriously consider her proposal. "Let me know when you want to talk with me again," my boss said as she showed them out.

As soon as she had returned to the office, I burst out, "How could you say something like that? You know you'd never be allowed to go through with it!"

But it was obvious that Hildegard had scarcely heard me. She was looking off at the setting sun, now finally broken free from the cloud cover, and the gold path it made over the blue-black waters. "Don't you see, Kitty?" she said. "This is just the opportunity I've been waiting for to show how the male sex can be reshaped."

Well, it was true that ever since I had started working for her four years ago, I'd heard with increasing frequency about how nature had not done a very good job when she designed men. But I'd never dreamed Hildegard would ever try to apply her ideas on the practical level. So now I replied as I often did when she'd gone on in this vein in the past: "It may be true that men are the more aggressive sex, but that can be explained by social and cultural factors –"

Hildegard was on her feet now. She'd walked out to the centre of the circular office and now she turned to face me. "If greater male aggressiveness was simply cultural, Kitty, then why haven't anthropologists found societies where females are the more violent sex? There ought to be some in remote areas, but in fact they haven't found even one."

"All right," I said. "That has a simple explanation. Men are a little larger and have more upper body strength, so in a pre-industrial society it makes more sense for them to be the fighters –"

"And because of that," she broke in, "nature has given them brains to match."

"Well, it seems to me that whatever the differences in brain structure, they're trivial compared to cultural factors." I rose to my feet, cradling my electronic notebook in my arms. "But Hildegard, you can't be seriously thinking of doing this. You should have told those parents to hire a child care expert to advise them on how to avoid raising another criminal offspring." Hildegard had come up with some crazy ideas since I'd started working for her, but this was the first one which frightened me. I perched on the edge of her desk and tried to make my voice as soothing and reasonable as possible. "Remember, you hired me because you wanted someone sensible to manage your affairs, to give you prudent advice. Well, I'm advising you now not to do this, not that you'd be allowed to in any case."

"Who said anything about applying to ethics committees?" Hildegard asked, and I felt the hair on the back of my neck prickle. "I'm sure I can get permission to counteract the ADD genes routinely. Whatever else I choose to do on this island with two or three assistants, and with the parents' knowledge and consent, is my own business. The Dunnetts told me as much when I was showing them out."

I felt sick to my stomach. "But Hildegard, if anything went wrong, if the child was handicapped or if someone talked, that would probably be the end of this institute, and certainly the end of your freedom to do what you want in the laboratory."

She did not answer immediately, but smoothed down her lab coat. "It's a risk worth taking," she said. "This experiment could prove what I've been saying for years about brain structure and sex roles. This child will be a new kind of male. His family, granted, will know there's something a little different about him, but society won't, and it's general cultural expectations that shape the raw material of physiology into what's seen as appropriate sex roles. If he can be tested at regular intervals throughout his childhood, that will give us a much more reliable sense of what the limits of that raw material is. I'm sure Consuelo will do those tests, though not being able to publish immediately is going to be annoying."

"Don't you see," I exclaimed, "that if you can't publish, there's no point in doing this? Who's going to benefit from your findings? Didn't you tell me that nothing in science, real science, is private?"

But she wasn't even looking at me. One hand was poised over her keyboard, ready to strike. "You know something about virus vectors, don't you, Kitty – the ones we use to introduce genetic modifications in cells, especially in developing ones? Suppose this experiment worked and a vector for feminizing male brains was spread throughout the world? It's too late for those men who are adults now, but suppose most of the men born in the future were to be different? Now that would really change society."

I was so aghast it was a moment before I could speak. "But – but what if it all goes wrong and this poor boy is born deformed or –" Tears were burning in the corners of my eyes.

She held up her hand regally. "Kitty, I won't do



anything to that foetus I wouldn't do to my own son. Remember how good we are now at detecting problems, at aiming the vectors just at the genes we want to modify. So far as I can see, this experiment's only danger is that it may not change this boy in any apparent way." She touched her computer screen and it went dark. As she rose, she said, "Kitty, I hired you because you've got a conventional mind, though a sharp one. To make a really big advance in science or society, one has to be bold, to take risks. Trust me."

When the door closed behind her, the room was almost completely dark because the sun had set outside. Hildegard had not installed automatic lighting here, as she liked to watch the moon and stars. They weren't to be seen that night, however; it was overcast again. I went to the window where I could make out the faint glint of the surf down on the beach. I could see the green light at the end of the jetty. Beside it, the launch that brought our food and supplies, and occasional visitors from the outside world, rocked gently in the waves. I had found peace here, there was no doubt about that. It wasn't simply that I'd been able to drop out of the corporate rat race and help accomplish things that I really believed in, like fighting mental handicaps. I had also got away from men, and especially from Roger. I frowned at the memory and felt a sharp little tug in my belly. For the nth time, I wondered why I had let him talk me into having an abortion. *I just know that I'll be no good with children*, he had told me with disarming frankness in his dark eyes. Oh Roger, you creep, I thought – you're just the type who finally marries at fifty, probably to a woman half your age, and then has three children and preaches the virtues of fatherhood. I sighed and turned away from the window, where I was beginning to see my reflection. My Japanese father and Polish mother had given me flat, broad features, and I didn't want to be reminded of my appearance at that point. Roger's problem had not been aggressiveness. If I had believed that Hildegard's experiment held out some hope of producing men who took more responsibility in private life, I might have gone along with it. Instead I was going to have to try to stop her.

The next day, we took Arlene and Sterling – we were on a first-name basis by then – on the standard tour of the labs, then returned to Hildegard's office. "It's amazing what you're able to do here," Arlene was saying as I came in with a tray of coffee and sandwiches. "What you've done with those male monkeys was very interesting – the tender way they groomed their offspring –" her hard face had softened for a moment as she no doubt thought of the past, while Sterling frowned and shifted a bit on the sofa. He's the one who's not convinced, I thought, and it's not surprising given what Hildegard lets slip about her attitude towards men.

"So you've had some time to think about my proposal," Hildegard said, clearly focusing only on Arlene's enthusiasm. "Are you ready to accept it?"

Sterling opened his mouth, then hesitated, though

Arlene wasn't even looking at him. "We can't have the past repeating itself," she said fervently. "I won't be trapped, I won't." Her shoulders were hunched and her lips were set.

Sterling said, "But I was wondering, Dr Branson, now that we're here in private in your office, if you couldn't tell us in a little more detail about what you plan to do and why. I'm afraid all those scientific details went past me very fast yesterday."

I poured myself a cup of black coffee and sat where I could see both the Dunnetts and Hildegard with her computer screen. I felt rather naked without my notebook, but she had thought it best that we not make it obvious we were recording this interview. "Display six," Hildegard said to her computer, and the image of a human brain appeared on the screen. "Our brains," Hildegard said, "differ depending on our sex, and this explains many of the differences in behaviour between men and women." I had to bite my lips to keep them shut. "In very general terms we can say that men are more aggressive and women more nurturing." She clicked the button again and two brains appeared on the screen, one marked XX and the other XY. The locations of structural differences were marked by flashing points of light.

"Some of these differences control sexual functioning, others affect general behaviour. My idea is to leave normal sexual behaviour intact and to target those points which we know are linked to aggression in men and greater empathy in women. Yesterday I mentioned androgen insensitivity syndrome, which prevents a male foetus from becoming male. The basic path of development of the human being is female. You need the Y chromosome, which contains the maleness gene, to interfere with that. What I am suggesting is that at the right stage in the growth of your son's brain, androgen insensitivity genes be introduced so that parts of the brain develop along their natural female lines. At precisely the right moment, the vector carrying these genes will self-destruct, and your son will grow up a perfectly normal male – except that he will be more considerate of others' feelings than the average for his sex."

I was distracted by Sterling's fidgeting from wondering whether this treatment would have made Roger a better person. "Dr Branson, are you sure this is really necessary?" he began.

"Of course it is!" Arlene said, striking the palm of her hand against the arm of her chair. "Sterling, this is the only way we can be free of the worry that the past might repeat itself." She hadn't applied her make-up as skilfully today as yesterday and I could see the traces of dark rings under her eyes. With her other hand, she patted her stomach. "It's my genes that need changing, so I'm entitled to change them."

I shot a glance at Hildegard that said *this woman is confused, to say the least*. But my boss placed her thin white hand on Arlene's slightly tanned, much younger one and said, "Of course you understand that I can't give you a one hundred per cent guarantee that nothing will go wrong."

As Arlene nodded, I broke in, "You must realize that we're unlikely to get the clearance to carry this



out." Surely a lawyer knows the importance of obeying the law, I thought.

Arlene smiled primly. "The procedure that Dr Branson has proposed is certainly not illegal – there's no law against it. Since it doesn't involve changes that will be inherited, it is merely an abandonment of regular procedures not to seek approval for it first."

"Still, if it's such a good idea, why not apply for clearance?" I asked.

"Dr Branson says that such authorization takes time and the outcome of her application would be uncertain. I've checked and she's right. In the long term I'd like to clarify the legal situation, but in the short term we have to do whatever we can to help our child."

"And do you agree?" I asked Sterling, earning myself glares from both Hildegard and Arlene.

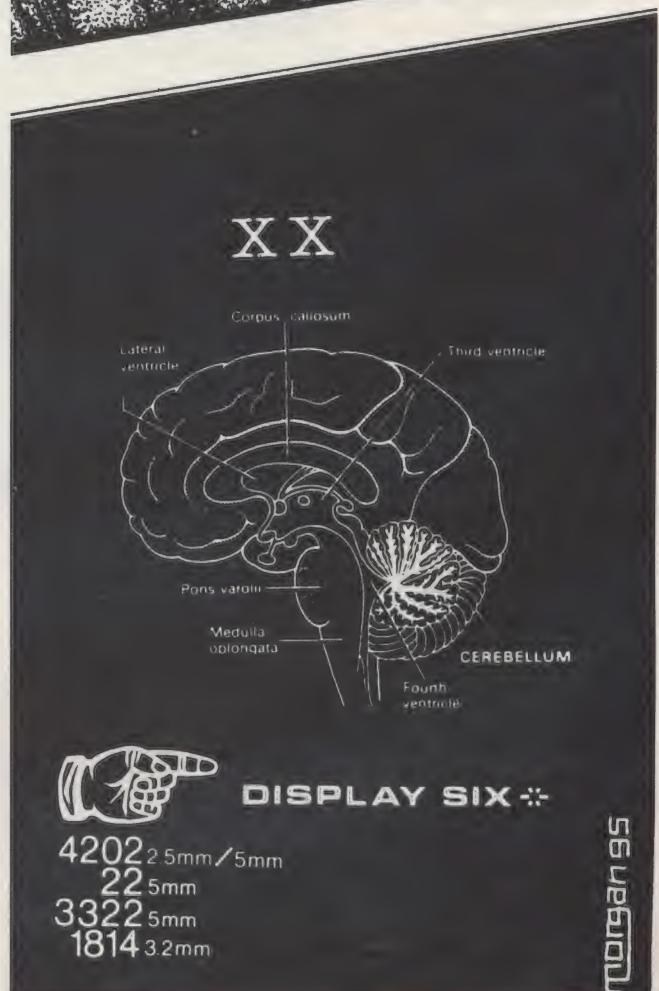
He studied his well-manicured nails for a moment before saying, "I admit that in certain situations men are more apt to be violent than women, and our son could be in one of those situations, so I just see this as extra insurance." Arlene patted his hand as he looked at me, his blue eyes frank but slightly unfocused.

"But what if something were to go wrong?"

Hildegard's frown would have been obvious to Arlene if she hadn't been looking at me. "That is a possibility, I admit, but I am willing to sign a pledge not to attempt to sue her if there is a problem. I am convinced she will use all due care and attention," Arlene said, but her eyes were hard. The best guarantee of confidentiality, I thought, was that each party could only expose the other's misdeed by exposing her own, and therefore neither would talk. But I had to do what I could to stop them. As they shared a mutual madness, I decided the only chance for sanity was to tackle them individually.

That evening, I went to Hildegard's octagonal cabin. It was wet and windy that night, but I felt no apprehension about walking alone in the darkness. Since I like to wander by myself, that's another virtue of life on the island. "Come in," she called when I knocked – most of us don't bother to lock our doors – and I went in to find her seated before a row of computer screens. On three of the screens were elegant coloured models of protein chains, on the fourth was a double-spiralled section of DNA, and on the fifth was an array of molecules representing a cell membrane. An enamelled Swedish wood stove was in the centre of the cabin and I came up and stood behind Hildegard, warming myself in its heat, but I didn't launch into the attack immediately as I had planned. My eyes were drawn to those braids of different coloured balls that represented proteins. I knew their shape had to be precisely right for the cell to recognize and admit them. Molecular biology is so simple, I thought, just a matter of locks and keys. "It's too bad that psychology isn't as easy as this," I said.

"Genetics isn't as simple as it may look to you," Hildegard said.





"Oh, I didn't mean it doesn't require a lot of knowledge and talent to make cells do the things you want," I said soothingly. "My point was that it can be reduced to a few clear basic principles, but human behaviour can't."

"Only because we don't know enough about it yet," Hildegard said, rotating one of the hormones in her hologram tank. "Someday we'll be able to design minds in this way too."

That remark made me cold, for all that I was next to the wood stove. "I still don't understand why you're doing it," I said.

She spun her chair around to face me. "And I don't understand why you're opposed, Kitty."

"You're risking everything you've built up here for this one illegal experiment. And I don't believe that doing things with men's brains is likely to make them better behaved; only changing society will do that."

Hildegard crossed her arms. "I've been able to do some positive things in my life, Kitty. Discovering a way of regenerating nerve cells was important, and of course it also made me rich so that I could build this institute. Since then I've found a way to repair the fragile X gene, but I've come to realize I'm not doing anything about the major causes of human suffering. It's all very well for physicians to patch up the damage that human beings do to each other, but it's far better to stop the injury happening in the first place." She pointed at the molecule slowly rotating in her tank. "This is more powerful than any politician, ideology or army – this is going to change history."

I was shaken myself by the fervency of her dream and, indeed, I'd seen what she had been able to do in her laboratory. But I still felt she was overreaching herself. "All right, so all these plans sound marvelous – but suppose the poor boy turns out to be brain-damaged because of what you've done?"

Hildegard was looking at the flames dancing behind the glass door of her wood stove. "If doctors don't take risks, they'll never be able to cure anyone," she finally said.

"But don't you see that you could still accomplish what you want by doing it publicly? I mean publishing your ideas, debating them with other scientists and people in general. It would take longer, of course, but in the end your scheme might be approved and tested where everyone could see it. And if it worked, then you'd have a far better chance of having the scheme put into action by public consensus, rather than this crazy notion of some worldwide conspiracy to spread viruses carrying your vector." I was sweating and I moved away from the stove and sat in a folding canvas chair.

Hildegard swivelled her chair to face me, though she still wouldn't look me in the eyes. "No, Kitty, I was being a bit melodramatic the other day. I do intend to publish in 15 years or so. By then we'll have enough evidence to show that my theories are right, and I'll have retired so they won't be able to touch me."

She wasn't as crazy as I'd thought, but she was

still crazy. I stood up. "As your adviser, I can't be responsible for any of the consequences of this," I said.

"There's no need for you to be, dear," she said. I stood there for a few more minutes, but she went back to work as if I was not even in the room, so I left. I made my way down to the beach – not the sandy one where the jetty is, but the stony one on the west side of the island. There's nothing of human handiwork visible there, and I find it comforting. There were ragged holes in the clouds through which I could see glimpses of the stars. I could threaten to quit my job, but I doubted that would be enough to stop Hildegard. My foot slipped on a large, rounded stone and I swore. I could of course just leave it alone, hope that no harm was done to the fetus and that no one ever discovered what had happened, and continue with my pleasant job. But I knew it was wrong to tinker with someone's mind merely to satisfy a theory, especially a theory that would allow men to duck responsibility for their behaviour by claiming it was genetically determined.

I tried to think of what argument might be effective with Arlene. Perhaps I could find out from her more about why her first child went astray and help her realize it couldn't have been simply genetic. If I failed with her as well, then at least I wouldn't be responsible for whatever followed.

The opportunity came the next afternoon. Arlene had drawn up a confidential document in which both parties pledged not to reveal what was happening, and I went to the guest-house to discuss it with her. Hildegard was already deep in the design of her gene vectors, and in any case she was no use when it came to legal matters, whereas I'd had some training. We met on the enclosed porch, which had rattan furniture and bonsai trees. I was disappointed to find that Sterling wasn't there. He'd returned to Seattle for an urgent meeting with a client, his wife said.

I sat on the sofa, the old-fashioned paper document on a clipboard between us. "I see," I said, "that you're excusing Dr Branson from all claims of negligence and incompetence. You must trust her a great deal."

"Well, I wouldn't go through with this if I didn't," Arlene said. Today she was wearing black designer jeans and a fashionable loose top that changed colour according to the air temperature. I felt dowdy in my tweed suit, well-cut though it was. I realized it was going to be as challenging to confront her as Hildegard.

"Still," I said, "wouldn't you feel, well, responsible if your son were to reach his teenage years and some problem were to appear that might be due to what had happened before he was born?"

"I'd feel much worse if I did nothing and he grew up to be a criminal like my first child," Arlene said.

There was a tiny twisted pine in a green dish on the table in front of the sofa. I was close enough to see the grey wire that forced it to grow in a graceful



curve as if it were in the winds on a mountainside, instead of the sheltered environment of the guest-house porch. "So you're absolutely certain that what happened to your first child has a genetic explanation?" I asked.

Arlene's blue eyes looked icily at me. "I hope you're not suggesting that Sterling and I failed as parents?"

Her reaction was enough to reinforce my suspicions on that point, but what could I say? "I mean there could have been lots of reasons. A brain tumour –"

"The autopsy found nothing of the kind." She stopped glaring at me and looked out at the trees across the clearing around the guest-house.

I tried a new tack. "The approach Dr Branson has suggested isn't really dealing directly with your worry, is it? I mean you're concerned about criminality and she's concerned about male chauvinism –"

"In my work, I've seen a very intimate link between crime and male violence," she said.

"Well, of course there is," I said. "What I meant was that it's still an open question what the real cause of most of this male proclivity for aggression is. It could be the society we live in, in which case changing the action of genes wouldn't much matter, would it?"

She looked at me a long moment. "If you feel this way, I'm surprised you're still working for Dr Branson. But I've got an answer to your question." She scratched at an invisible spot on her jeans. "If you had lived through what I've lived through, seen how a boy raised in an ideal environment who had everything going for him lost interest in school and respect for his parents, stayed out later and later each night – it was just like it was pre-programmed, and it was. You would have seen the power of genes."

"But even so, wasn't there some incident which triggered these difficulties?" I asked.

She turned away again and crossed her arms. "When he was about ten, he came home with a bloody nose because he'd fought with his best friend over an airgun. But that's hardly significant, is it?"

"There were no, er, problems between you and your husband that your son could have found disturbing?"

"Really, this is quite an interrogation," Arlene said. "But I haven't got anything to hide. There were no problems between us – no affairs, no quarrels about money, not even any in-law problems." She scratched at the invisible spot again.

I thought of my parents. No doubt they would have also denied having any problems, but there was my workaholic father's belief that nothing I did was ever good enough for him and my mother's obsession with her weight. They scarcely ever quarrelled, but they shared the space of our house almost as if the other did not exist. If it hadn't been for my grandmother and spending summer vacations at her house, I don't know what would have happened to me. The pain of that memory gave me the courage to ask, "Are you sure your son knew how much you

loved him?"

She tilted her chin up. "Of course. A therapist told us as much when we went to see one after Michael started having problems."

Her complete absence of self-doubt grated on me. "I should think that you'd therefore be very confident that history won't repeat itself," I said. "But instead you want to go through with this unauthorized experimental procedure, which is going to cost you and your husband a lot of money" – I tapped the paper on the clipboard, where it specified that the Institute would receive a very generous donation from the Dunnetts – "when it doesn't really seem necessary."

She took the board from me and said, "There's no amount of money I wouldn't spend to give my child the best possible start in life." To my horror, instead of getting angry, she sniffled and said, "The only way I can heal the pain of Michael's death is to have my second child grow up completely free from the burdens of the past. And now if you don't mind, I've got to check my e-mail."

I got up rather shakily after she left, and looked at the bonsai tree in its cramped pot. "Some people do the same thing to their children," I told it.

Still, I couldn't conclude that Arlene and Sterling were destined to be disastrous parents again. This time they would probably be more careful, perhaps even more loving. I put my copy of the secret agreement in my briefcase and left the guest-house. Once back in my apartment, I showered, changed into jeans, a flannel shirt and hiking boots. I'd decided to do something that I do every so often – walk the trail that runs along the entire spine of the island and then return via the beach. It would be well after dark by the time I got back, but as you know, that didn't worry me. I suspected that the Dunnetts' parenting had something to do with what had happened to their first child, but I also knew that Hildegard wouldn't care if I told her. She would probably say it didn't matter if they were cold and distant; it would merely recreate the environment their first son experienced, so that any differences in their second son's behaviour would be due to her treatment. You've done your best to stop them, I told myself.

When I had gotten up among the steep pine-covered hills that formed the island's backbone, I took great lungfuls of the cold fresh air and tried in good Buddhist fashion to empty my mind. I felt, as I paused at a clearing to gaze at the distant white peaks of the Olympic range, that if only I could stop the fluttering of my conscious mind, the answer would come to me and I would know the right thing to do. This is something that's always worked for me, at least since I've come to the island. Before then I had always lived in cities and I'd even thought I liked their excitement, but now I saw that what I had really wanted was to keep myself from being aware of my unhappiness. Now that I was genuinely happy at last, I wanted less complicated and more beautiful things around me. But that day the surroundings were not enough to quiet my mind. I couldn't stop thinking of Roger and the way I had



let myself be pressured into the abortion. I had thought that children should only be brought into the world when there are two parents willing to love them. I'm afraid I'd also thought that Roger would eventually come round to the idea of marriage and children – with me, naturally. When I found out, a few months later, that he was seeing a model whose looks I could never compete with, I was devastated. I quit my job – well, I had to because he also worked there – and then fortunately I saw Hildegard's funny little ad in the paper. After that, everything changed.

I was coming down the hills now, towards the beach. I could see it below me – an arc of grey volcanic sand. At that moment I suddenly had a very disturbing thought: was I about to capitulate to Hildegard the way I had surrendered to Roger? Was I once again going to allow something I did not think was right to happen because another person had a stronger personality than mine? No, damn it, I thought as my boots pounded down the path. I'm not going to give in this time, I said to myself as I stepped out of the trees onto the beach. I'll e-mail Marilee, tell her I've got something very interesting for the *Post-Intelligencer*. It'll make a great headline: "Science Scandal on Secret Island as Top Doc Tamper with Genes." But Hildegard would certainly throw me out. I stood, staring at the sea, blinking because the tears in my eyes were blocking the view. Good-bye, island.

The next day I told Hildegard that I needed to see my dentist and do some shopping. I don't think she suspected a thing, though I was careful not to contact Marilee until the launch had landed me at Port Townsend that afternoon. After all, my boss had the technical ability to monitor all the communications leaving our island. I plugged in my phone and told Marilee I wanted to meet her, but it would have to be in private. She invited me to her apartment for dinner tomorrow and assured me her boyfriend would be out. I took the ferry on to Seattle. As the familiar skyline grew before me, I clutched the boat's railing with white-knuckled hands. I believed I was doing the right thing, but the thought of all I was going to lose left a bitter taste in my throat.

My salary allowed me to check into a good hotel, so I did. I spent the next morning at the Market, but I didn't enjoy myself as I once had among the craft boutiques, fire-eaters and grey-haired hippies. Fortunately I'd brought my tracksuit and running shoes with me, so that afternoon I went out jogging. Ravenna Park was a place I had often gone as a student and I loved its steep, tree-lined ravines, criss-crossed by wooden foot-bridges. It was a cool, grey autumn afternoon and yellow birch leaves were blowing across the path as I trotted along the floor of the valley at an easy pace. I was easing off, having run hard the first thirty minutes. I felt more comfortable with my decision now. After all, I told myself, if something went wrong with the baby, how could I forgive myself?

I checked my watch. It was five o'clock – I had two

hours to get back to the hotel, shower and change and get over to Marilee's place. I pounded on – just a few more minutes of letting the exercise-induced endorphins flood my brain. The sun had set and the lights were coming on. The mothers with the baby carriages and the old men walking their dogs all seemed to have gone home, but the park wasn't completely empty. Coming along towards me on the path were three young men. They were laughing in a curiously high-pitched way, making me wonder what drug they had been dabbling with. I slowed down a little because I wasn't sure whether to approach them or to turn around, though there was all the length of the valley behind me. I suddenly wished that I'd gone back earlier, that it wasn't dark, that I'd never left the island.

But of course they had already seen me. They stopped and waited for me in the middle of the path, the boy on the left bobbing slightly from side to side. He wore a black leather jacket with the sleeves cut off. In the dim light of the park lamp I could see a row of studs on the forehead of the one in the middle, twinkling against his dark skin. Uh-oh, I thought, an implanter. The one on the right was a blond kid too young to have a beard but with acne pitting his skin. "Hey, babe, come give us a kiss," he said. His friend with the studs giggled. "Hey, she ain't got no tits," said the one on the right.

That was enough for me. I had already spun around and was racing down the path, my heart pounding in my chest. But I could hear them thudding along behind me. Surely I could outrun three drunks or drug addicts, I remember thinking, but mostly my mind was blank with panic. "Hey, babe, wait, let me squeeze your ass –" There was snorted laughter and scuffling behind me. But I was still ahead of them, and then I remembered that earlier I'd passed a staircase climbing out of the ravine near here. It wouldn't be easy to climb with my lungs screaming for oxygen, but then at least I'd be back on an ordinary residential street and therefore safe, I hoped.

I put on a final burst of speed as I saw the steps. I could hear heavy, laboured breathing behind me, and I leapt up the first two steps, but then almost froze as I felt a hand touch my buttock. I broke out of the shock and got up another step and, as I did so, I heard a clatter and a thud, followed by shouted curses. As I sprinted up the steps, I glanced back over my shoulder – it was the blond kid who had touched me, but he must have slipped as he did so and fallen back, colliding with his friends so that they all landed in a heap at the bottom of the stairs. Though my lungs felt as though I was inhaling fire, I managed to continue racing up the stairs. Above me I could see the cosy pinkish glow of the mercury vapour street light. With the aid of the railing, I pulled myself up the last few steps. I didn't dare look behind me, so I couldn't even tell if they were still following me. But even so I ran down the block, stopping only when I saw a cab cruising down the street. I waved frantically and it stopped. "Sorry, I'm off –" the driver began, then stopped; she must have seen



the expression on my face.

"The police —" was all I could manage to get out. She pressed a button and the rear door swung open for me. As soon as I was in, she did a U-turn and sped down the hill. "You okay, kid?" she asked.

"Yes, fine, I mean I'm okay," I gasped. "I was running in the park and some boys chased me." I was quite pleased with how coolly I managed to say it. After all, here I was, uninjured and alive, safe in the cab and out of their reach. Maybe I wouldn't even have nightmares about this, nightmares in which the blond kid didn't slip and the ending was different.

"The little shits," the cabbie said sympathetically. She was a swarthy middle-aged woman, probably Latina, with orange lipstick. Pixels on the lapels of her jacket flashed on and off.

I picked up the cab's phone, pressed my thumb against the pay plate and dialled Marilee's number. The problem was that when Marilee's face appeared on the phone's tiny five-centimetre screen, my cool had collapsed. "Sorry, I'm going to be late —" and then my throat tightened so that I couldn't speak.

"Kitty, what's wrong?" Marilee demanded. Her round Irish face was creased in sympathy. "What happened?"

"Some men — boys really — ran after me in the park. Oh, don't worry, I'm fine. I'm just going to the police station to report —" My throat had squeezed shut again.

"Which station? I'll be right there," Marilee said, greatly to my relief.

After I'd described to the police what had happened, Marilee insisted on taking me directly to her apartment, even though I was still in my jogging clothes. "It's only you and me," she said. But first she had to put her five-year-old daughter Lily to bed. Lily came out to say good-night to me, wearing her Wonder Woman pyjamas and carrying a plush frog under her arm. I hadn't yet had a chance to wash my face and Lily saw that I had been crying. "What's the matter?" she asked soberly.

"Auntie Kitty was chased by some boys in the park," Marilee told her.

"That's too bad," Lily said seriously. She held out her stuffed frog, its plastic pop-eyes staring at me. "This is Julie the Treefrog. She can spit poison. Do you want to take her next time you go to the park?"

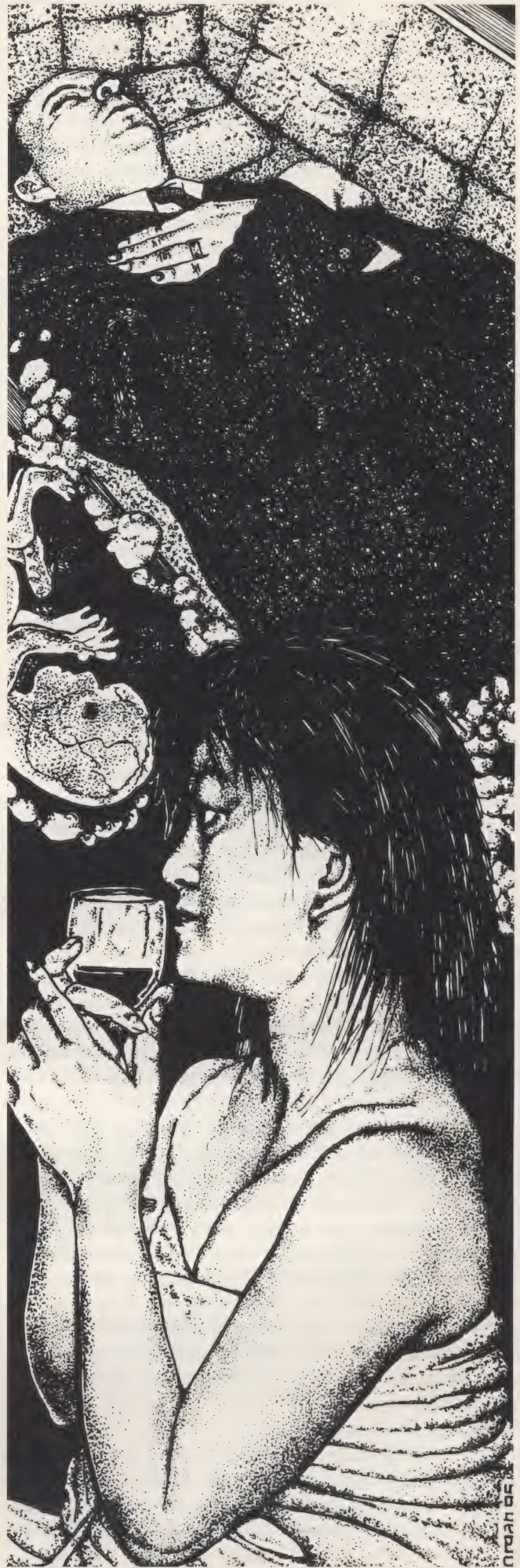
"Protect the rainforests," Julie croaked.

I laughed and lifted Lily to my lap. Her hair smelled of baby shampoo. "Thank you for your offer," I said, "but I'm going back to my island so I won't need Julie."

"Who will protect you then?" she asked, large grey eyes gazing up at me.

"Auntie Hildegard will," I said. But my hands were shaking when I set the little girl down on her feet.

I took a shower while Lily was being read her bedtime story, then Marilee and I sat down to the rather dried-out lasagna that had been waiting for us for over an hour. Marilee had bought an excellent red Bordeaux to drink, though. It was not until we had





finished the *crème anglaise* and there was only a finger of wine left in the bottle that she switched the topic of conversation from the shortcomings of Lily's father to my original reason for coming to see her. "So what's happening on Dr Branson's island that you want me to tell the world about?"

My hand shook again as I poured the last of the wine into my glass. "Oh that," I said. "It's not that important after all."

"Do you really expect me to believe that?" Marilee asked. "You don't come off that island very easily – not that I can blame you."

"You and Lily ought to come and visit me," I said. "This summer – we can dig for clams and go sailing and –" I had to stop to burp.

"So there's nothing especially interesting going on there? No scientific breakthroughs that you could give me the scoop on?" Marilee asked.

Despite all the wine I had drunk, my head was becoming increasingly clear. I felt something cold in the pit of my stomach, but it wasn't fear. It was an icy rage. "There are things going on all the time, of course," I said. "But I've decided that what I was going to talk to you about ought to remain confidential for now."

Marilee had a pretty, comic frown. "My dear, it's not fair to excite my curiosity and then go silent on me."

"It was an error of judgement on my part," I said, thinking of Roger.

Her eyebrows rose, but she said, "I hope you aren't being put under pressure to keep your mouth shut."

"Hildegard Branson's not like that," I assured her. We were silent for a minute or so and I studied the candle flame flickering on the other side of the dark green glass of the bottle. "I was carried away by a temporary enthusiasm," I said. "But now I've come to my senses." I thought of my father and his face stiff in death, but no more remote than it had been when he was alive.

"Whatever you say, dear," said Marilee, pouring me a brandy. As I lifted the glass to my lips and smelled its heady fumes, I wondered how I could have hid my fury from myself for so long. The glass chimed as I touched it to Marilee's. "To freedom," I said.

One day the following spring I was out on a walk. I had stopped in a little clearing in the forest to admire the violets, spots of purple springing up among the grey boulders and fresh green grass. The day was warm, but a light rain was falling. I sat down on a rock and prayed to what gods might be that Arlene's baby would be all right when he was born a few weeks hence.

To my surprise, someone else came striding down the path and into the clearing: a tall woman with wild white hair. She didn't seem to notice the violets, or for that matter, me either. "A penny for your thoughts, Dr Branson," I said.

Her head jerked around with surprise. "Oh, it's you, Kitty." She halted beside my boulder and balled her hands in her pockets. "I thought I ought to get out of the lab for once and take some exercise." She didn't look at me, but stared at the trees.

I frowned at the grass under my toes. We were no longer comfortable when we met each other outside of the lab or the office. She knew that I had disapproved; she was not sensitive enough to see that I now supported her, though unhappily. There was a hard little pebble of guilt in my mind that I couldn't dislodge, no matter how hard I tried.

"I know you're worried," Hildegard said suddenly, and her hand closed on my shoulder, startling me. I had to suppress the impulse to shrug her fingers off. But I knew I couldn't blame her; the decision not to expose the experiment had been mine.

"We're trapped in a paradox," I said. "By trying to reduce criminality, we've become criminals ourselves."

"Oh heavens no, dear. It's the intention that counts and we want to help men. Real criminals are motivated by greed, or national chauvinism, or anger."

Hildegard might not be acting out of anger, I thought, but I was. "What if we don't really know what we're doing?" I said, careful to use the first person plural rather than the second person singular.

"Nature blunders along," she said, "spewing out half-baked and jury-rigged devices like the panda's thumb and the human male. It's time for us to tidy up her work for her." Her hand tightened on my shoulder. "I have no children," she said, "but I'll give birth to a new human race."

And I'll be the unwilling midwife, I thought. But if Hildegard was right, my anxiety didn't matter. I imagined throwing it off and soaring into the future like Superwoman, but Hildegard's hubris frightened me. "Remember what happened to Dr Frankenstein," I said, attempting to make my tone jocular.

Hildegard snorted. "Mary Shelley makes it clear that his mistake was rejecting his creation. I won't do that."

Oh great, I thought, here I am, the mad scientist's assistant. But maybe this time the mad scientist is right. I scuffed at the grass with my toe, grinding a small depression in it. Well, at least I've made some progress. I'm no longer a victim; now I'm one of the perpetrators. I pulled up a violet and rolled it between my fingers. Perhaps Hildegard would succeed in making men more like women. But one thing was certain: I had already become more like a man.

**Jennifer Swift's** previous contribution to *Interzone* was "As We Forgive Our Debtors" (issue 72). An American expatriate (like so many "British" female sf writers!), she lives with her husband in Oxford and is presently working on a novel.



Full-blooded space opera works marvellously in print, a medium for which we provide our own images from the author's text. It can also work when projected onto a large Cinema-Scope screen, a format able to present vistas as grand as the genre demands. There is no evidence that space opera can work in any other medium: both "space" (as Douglas Adams has famously noted) and "opera" are big. The fusion of the two naturally results in something *very* big.

Which brings us to *Babylon 5* (American TV series created by J. Michael Straczynski, 22 episodes of 44 minutes, currently being screened on C4, second series: semi-regular cast of around 20, headed by Bruce Boxleitner as Captain John Sheridan, Jerry Doyle as Security Chief Michael Garibaldi, and Claudia Christian as Commander Susan Ivanova).

An opening narration informs us that *Babylon 5* is home to a quarter of a million humans and aliens, a five-mile long "self-contained world" (a human-built space station), constructed in "neutral territory," that at the "dawn of the third age of humanity...the great war came upon us." The year is 2259.

Should the show endure to the year 1998 J. Michael Straczynski has a five year "story arc" – in simpler times they called them "plans" – so that while some episodes are comparatively self-contained, all hold within them elements of the grand design. *Babylon 5* wants to tell us about a great, tragic galactic war sprawling across many star systems, engulfing many races and lasting for many years. To do so it struggles heroically against the constraints of television: timorous executives who feel uncomfortable with any serious exploration of science-fictional tropes, a budget which will not permit the filming of the majestic action the genre demands (the FX are excellent but limited, discounting the stock shots of the station and various craft coming and going), a 44-minute window through which to launch each segment of the epic adventure; but perhaps most of all, against the very nature of the medium.

To someone who grew up expecting TV sf to look tawdry the pre-credits space battle in "Acts of Sacrifice" is visually astonishing, yet the interface between the viewer and *Babylon 5*, which is to say the television screen and speakers, is self-defeatingly small. The average television screen is between 14 and 28 inches. But even the largest set is dwarfed by any cinema screen. The action of *Babylon 5* looks cramped.

Of course the NICAM sound is wonderful, but hardly essential, and has the unfortunate effect of leaving the picture even more beleaguered in the middle of the soundscape. Making

us more critical still, we've seen rather similar before at a size at which such visions really did inspire the old sense of wonder. Confronted with Lucas-Vision on TV we might think, "Hey, haven't FX improved since – (insert name of your own once favourite, now faded show)" but there's no elation, no sense of the truly epic, and very little involvement. Merely quiet admiration for advances in digital technology.

Beaten by the medium, *Babylon 5* settles for delivering its message with action offstage, retreating within the usual "futuristic" interiors, a mixture of a frontier town, the starship Enterprise and Rick's Café.

Of the various alien races, all essentially humanoid, the make-up ranges from very good to hopeless. The reptilian Narn impress, but the Minbari, having ten years previously brought earth to the brink of defeat in a galactic war, really should consider getting a new agent.

So much for the window dressing. The attitudes, behaviour, inter-relationships are all pure mid-90s America. The women are strong and the men worry about... everything. Sentiment is in, racism and sexism are out. One scene in "Acts of Sacrifice," episode written by Straczynski, delivers a most unusual sense of wonder. Saddled with a genuinely bizarre "sex" scene with an alien ambassador, Claudia Christian throws caution and sanity to the wind for a wildly sarcastic "performance"; dancing, skipping and jumping around the bemused alien while out-groaning Meg Ryan's most famous two minutes and interspersing a humorously embittered commentary on contemporary dating rituals. Elsewhere, the crew eat hamburgers, and watch the war on the galactic equivalent of CNN.

Do Warner Brothers really believe the future will be just the same? Or is it that they know the target audience requires essential familiarity?

Still, if as is often suggested, all sf is really about the present, what is *Babylon 5* about? Subscribing to the notion, however simplistic, that *Star Trek* depicted a triumphantly optimistic American diplomacy (occasionally of the gunboat variety) making the galaxy a better place, *Babylon 5* might be taken to represent a post-Gump America desperately clinging to the wreckage of disintegrating hopes, isolated in "neutral territory" watching in horror as the world outside slowly but inexorably tears itself apart.

It is surely not coincidental that Bruce Boxleitner, drafted in at the beginning of the second series in an attempt to boost ratings, is a dead ringer for Bill the Saxophone-Playing President. Or that Jerry Doyle bears an uncanny resemblance to Bruce

# Bill the Galactic Hero on the Planet of the TIMOROUS TELEVISION EXECUTIVES

Gary Dalkin

Willis, a character actor whose only truly successful star roles have been as an icon of America under siege, bloody but never quite bowed in the *Die Hard* films. Just as the show retreats within the safety of the station for most of each episode, so the USA retreats, a fearful isolationist monolith.

Perhaps we should remember the fate of the previous four *Babylon* stations. In the not too distant past this future has taken a savage battering, an inconceivable defeat, a blow to the collective pride, and for humanity – read America – the galaxy has become a darker place. The psyche aches. The wounds will not heal. Perhaps the name of the place is Vietnam.

Back in 1995, the cover of the *Radio Times* for April 28 sported a '50s style flying saucer and the legend "Why sci-fi is taking over television." Inside, posing the question "Why has TV gone sci-fi mad?" Roland White seems surprised that "regular folks" watch *The X-Files*, and that sci-fi (sic) is no longer just the domain of those with "lank hair, a degree in chemical engineering and a lack of personal hygiene." So we are the last minority not covered by Political Correctness.

And all this because BBC2 is screening the new *Outer Limits*, an event which – not withstanding that the only two new British sf drama series to reach our TV screens this decade were broadcast four years ago, total running time, including adverts and one butchered repeat, considerably less than the hours devoted to crime dramas for the week covered by the same *Radio Times* – "coincides with a revival in the whole field of science fiction."

Still, as Michael Jackson, current Controller of BBC2 says, "it's not true to say there's no British science fiction: look at *Dr Who* and *Blake's 7*."

We did. They were a long time ago.

Gary Dalkin



# POWERS RUMPS

**John Brunner**  
*interviewed by*  
**Sally Ann Melia**

**J**ohn Brunner was born in 1934, had his first science-fiction novel published in 1951 at the age of 17 (but don't try looking for it; it appeared under a pseudonym from a very downmarket UK publisher and has never been reprinted), and sold his first short story to John W. Campbell's *Astounding SF* in 1953 when he was just 19. Since then he has written scores more novels and hundreds of short stories, and won several awards. It has been a long career, probably one of the most remarkable in British sf, and yet Brunner titles have been missing from the bookshop shelves of late. I decided to find out why, but first I asked him my Chinese question...

## **Have you ever walked along the Great Wall of China?**

No, I have never been to China. My father went to China, my grandfather went to China, and now I've married a Chinese, so I have ambitions to keep up the family tradition but I haven't managed it yet. I met my wife in Warsaw, Poland. However I have recently begun a series of fantasy and science-fiction stories based in China. There was one I'm particularly pleased with that appeared in *Asimov's* called "Good With Rice." Another is "The Emperor Who Had Never Seen a Dragon" – this is a story about an "emperor" who invades China. He is basically a plainsman who thinks houses are like lairs for wolves. In one of the cities he has conquered he suddenly bursts out, "I have never seen a dragon!" He thinks they must exist because all the temples have magnificently painted dragons on the walls and there are pictures of them everywhere in the city. So he orders them to bring him a person he believes really can see dragons, a drunken painter living

with his daughter in a slum, drinking rice wine every night. The emperor finds it unbearable that this man can picture dragons and he, the conqueror, cannot. You doubtless know that dragons and phoenixes were only seen by people of great ability and spiritual worth.

## **You have had a lengthy writing career. Is it a hundred novels you have written overall?**

I have written nearly a hundred *books*, but not all are novels. I've published short-story collections too. But it is three years since I secured a commission for a novel. I seem to have been abandoned by my publishers.

## **This must be very hard for you.**

It's a poor reward for all the work I've spent my life on.

## **So what happened?**

Well, many things, but mainly the American paperback market has been taken over by accountants. I can quote the view of Joe Haldeman, whom I spoke with at the European convention in Romania last summer. He said the American paperback publishing houses have been taken over by the money men. All they are interested in is keeping the racks full, not in bookshops but in supermarkets, food and drug stores, and airports. They change the contents every six weeks. They are not interested in people who can command advances of 20 to 30 thousand dollars. They have people who will work for \$5,000, maybe \$3,000. As Joe said, "My dear John, you don't stand a hope in hell of making a living as a writer again."

## **What about publishing in the UK?**

I have no publisher in the UK. Most of the UK companies with a few honourable exceptions are now dictated to by their New York owners. I am out of touch with the details, but I've lost count of the number of times I have rung up a publishing house and asked to talk to my editor and been told, "Oh, he doesn't work here any more." This has been the story of my life for the past few years. And it's not only me: many writers who once were household names can no longer make a living.

## **So what do you think of these new sf paperbacks?**

I can't bear to read them. I now and then glance at one, but to be honest, as my life draws to a close I feel I have too little time left to waste it on trash.

## **Looking back over your life, of all the scientific events of the 20th century which do you think is the most significant?**

It's almost impossible to single out one event more significant than the others, because the world has been



changed so quickly and so radically. In the 1950s, soon after the War, I used to reflect that my father was slightly younger than the motor car, older than the powered aircraft, much older than the wireless, and a great deal older than television, yet in the end he survived to witness spaceflight. In my study I keep a wonderful article by Chicago journalist Mike Royko who watched the first Moon-landing from a retirement home in the company of an old man whose parents took him west as a child in a covered wagon!

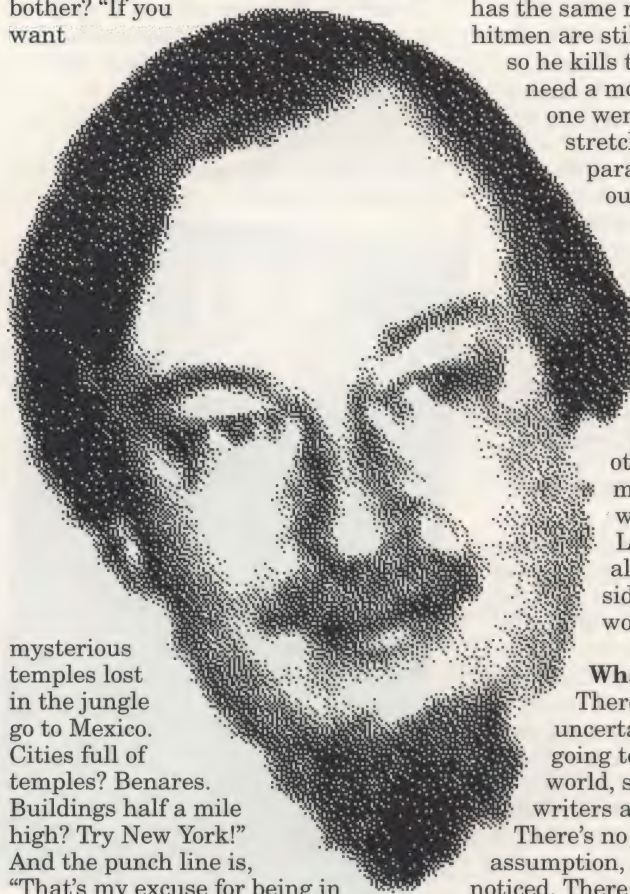
I sometimes think that the most significant development to have occurred this century has nothing to do with transportation, nothing to do with weaponry (even though now we have weapons that could destroy us all). It has to do with communications. I think of the way in which the world is being knit together in a unified global village. Which brings up innumerable problems exemplified by the standard encyclopedia. Who has the power to dictate what we are going to know in the next generation? Who is the censor? Who is going to decide there isn't room for *this* on the disc even though it is an important historical fact? I keep remembering about the 11th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the last from which you could learn about the schismatic votes at Avignon and Orange, because it was thereafter taken over by a Jesuit-controlled foundation. From then on an awful lot of Catholic history got wiped out. I'm afraid this kind of thing is going to happen more and more. What are you going to find under "Communism" in the 21st-century CD-ROM encyclopedia?

### What about a specific scientific discovery?

I can only speak of achievements in the latter half of this century. I started reading science fiction in the late 1940s. We generally assumed that we were going to continue our progress in a linear fashion. Back in those days you could imagine landing a starship direct from space into the Pacific Ocean. Later on someone would say, "Hang on, how about the effects of gravity?" It was engineers at White Sands who came up with points like that, but that was when people were treating our ideas seriously. Science-fiction authors went on blithely talking about antigravity, how ships would float down to Earth like balloons, because we wanted that.

There's a wonderful story that sums up the matter of fantasy-versus-reality. Lawrence Watt-Evans wrote a story called "Why I Left Harry's All-night Hamburgers." If you haven't read it, find it. Harry's was a small bar in the middle of the

Midwest which happened to be at the junction of countless parallel worlds with people travelling across them. You got people coming in after midnight from all over, topless women, spacemen with frost on the exterior of their spacesuits, all kinds of strays. Young and impressionable, a guy working as a waiter wanted to go travelling like them, but was warned you could never go back to the universe you left and anyway why bother? "If you want



mysterious temples lost in the jungle go to Mexico. Cities full of temples? Benares. Buildings half a mile high? Try New York!" And the punch line is, "That's my excuse for being in Benares – what's yours?" A gorgeous little story.

### Are you very keen on parallel worlds?

Well, I once wrote a book called *Times Without Number* set in a world where the Spanish Armada conquered Britain and the greatest invention of the 20th century was not space travel but time travel, giving access to uncountable possible alternative realities. The Catholic church justified their use of it along these lines: "Consider what makes an act of free will free. It lies here – that all the possible consequences of the act be fulfilled."

The notion of parallel worlds is becoming more and more accepted in scientific circles but the trouble is we have no control over the different tracks we are going to go along next. I'm sure there is a version of me in uncountable other universes where I'm happy and successful and all the things I'm not in this one... I wrote a story in the manner of James

Thurber recently, "The Paraverse," which appeared in *Expanse*, and called it a future fable for our time. A professor's brother, a compulsive gambler, turns up at the university with the heavies after him for money lost on the horses, finds the professor has developed this cage that allows immediate transfer to a different universe, and expects it to take him to a world where he actually won. Unfortunately the one he arrives in has the same racing results and the hitmen are still knocking on the door, so he kills the inventor. All fables need a moral and mine for this one went, "Parallel lines stretch away to infinity but parallel worlds can't outreach asininity."

Setting aside any scientific justification, the reason I like parallel-world stories is that they are fun! I enjoy ones that take real historical characters and move them into other settings. I very much liked the wonderful device Keith Laumer invented that allowed you to travel sideways across parallel worlds.

### What's the future for sf?

There is a great deal of uncertainty about what is going to happen in the real world, so as usual we sf writers are floundering a bit. There's no kind of shared assumption, at least none that I've noticed. There doesn't appear to be anything like the way when John W. Campbell was editing *Astounding* his writers more or less took it for granted we were going to evolve psi powers next. I even wrote about that myself in a book called *Telepathist*, not because I agreed but because I wanted to use telepathy as a metaphor for total human communication. Later, of course, there were other shared assumptions that generated a lot of good work. Writers took an important theme and examined it from different angles. Cyberpunk is an example. Some years ago I was invited to speak at Imperial College and the secretary of the sf group said his members were interested in cyberpunk and would like me to talk about it. It so happened that the week before I received the anthology *Mirrorshades*, the nearest thing to a way of defining the school, so to speak. I sat down and read it. What really surprised me was how exact a line of descent I could frame for every one of the stories. I would say, "That derives



from..." or "That reminds me of..."

In my view the earliest cyberpunk story was "Coming Attraction" by Fritz Leiber, from *Galaxy* in about 1951. Of course this kind of thing is basically a matter of labels put on from outside, as when Michael Moorcock took over *New Worlds* and someone coined the term New Wave. There was nothing really new in it, nothing Philip Wylie had not done in the mid-1930s and nothing the Dadaists hadn't done even earlier. From the point of view of a working writer the use of labels is a distinct drag. Nonetheless cyberpunk did indicate a lot of people were concentrating on computer consciousness and that sort of thing. It seemed like an interesting area to explore at the time. But by the time you get around to putting a label on something it's virtually moribund. You have to be ahead of the real world or else you're not actually writing science fiction. At least that's my opinion.

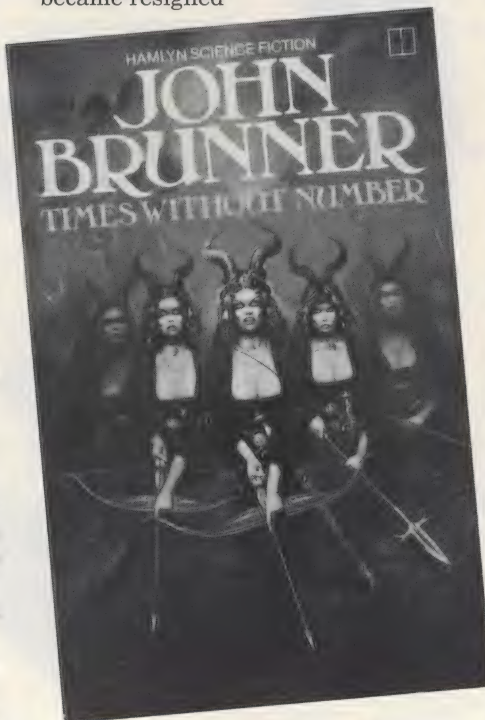
I suppose I am somewhat out of touch. I don't read much fiction any more. I read more non-fiction, in a ratio of about four to one. I keep up my subscription to *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, the most literate of the magazines, but otherwise I only see the magazines where I have a story of my own and read the rest of the contents. There seems to be a definite lack of direction; there are no shared assumptions, no sense of a most probable future. It is almost as though we could be going anywhere tomorrow and we're all very conscious of the fact. It is an uncomfortable feeling to try to write something about the future that you are absolutely certain is going to be rubbish in a day or two. You can take refuge by going into the very far future. I wrote a story for *Analog* a while ago, "The Numbers Racket," another of my series of imaginary collaborations with writers who influenced my own work, this time with Eric Frank Russell. It's a completely incredible story set in the far future with human colonies around dozens of stars, and basically it's a squib. I don't mean it's incredible because people are likely to say, "Well, we aren't going to colonize the stars tomorrow, are we?" – rather because it's just a neat joke not meant to be taken seriously. Of course even in the very far future you have to get things right.

There was a time early in my career when editors and reviewers used to point out that I was one of the few writers of sf who bothered about economics. (Religion too, sometimes.) I even once wrote a book called *Total Eclipse* in which humanity had built a starship. One starship. I extrapolated from the fact that it used to take the resources of an industrial power to build and run ocean liners; now there are only one or two industrial powers

that can afford to build airliners. It might well take the entire resources of the planet Earth to build a starship. This is apparently the sort of thing most other writers don't care to look into. I think on the whole I have been proved right. We are now in an epoch dominated by economics and religion. There is not really much of a basis to continue what used to be called science fiction.

**Could you tell me why you are writing more and more horror, in the place of science fiction and fantasy?**

For various reasons connected with my disillusionment about "our glorious future among the galaxies." I long ago became resigned



to the fact that I couldn't actually think of anything worse than I was bound to find in tomorrow's newspaper. One scarcely needs to look beyond the next corner of the street before finding something that is quite disgustingly horrible. Our collective stupidity throughout my lifetime has brought me to the conclusion that we are not really going to go out and conquer the universe by the power of steam, so I have been writing more horror over the past few years. I look back over my collection of books and discover I have the very first *Pan Book of Horror Stories* on my shelf. I have been reading horror most of my life, for example the Dorothy L. Sayers collections of *Detection*, *Mystery* and *Horror* that I brought when I was a kid. "Larva," my most recent story, due for publication in *Beyond*, is set in a dull, ordinary, Midlands industrial-type town with a smart suburb adjacent, chosen for essentially the same reason as Ramsey Campbell does his horror against this

kind of background. Society today is by no means the kind of late 20th century that was envisaged by the people who contributed to *Amazing* in the 1920s. There is all kinds of really nasty stuff going on. As the old saying goes, "Turn any wet stone..."

**What individual happenings have brought you to the pessimistic view that humans have no future among the stars?**

That is a very good question, I suspect it's because of the element of idealism that formed a great part of my upbringing. I was a wartime child. I learned to read just before World War II broke out and I was very efficiently propagandized. Everyone in Britain was told: "How wonderful the world is going to be after the war! This really is going to be the war to end all wars!" Of course sf reflected this optimism, especially American sf. After all, they emerged the richest country in the world. Their armies were on the victorious side. Generally speaking people were looking up to the United States. I had great sympathy with them because they had the best science fiction. I wish I didn't have to say this, but it was not until I matured out of this naive attitude that I began to see just what an enormous burden we were still carrying.

We have an awful lot of knowledge, yet there is an awful lot of "the monkey" in us still. We seem to feel that because we *can* do something we *must*. What we lack is wisdom, and with the current resurgence of fundamentalist religion one is forced to accept that what looked like the triumph of rationalism – the promise of a brighter and better future, all that – is going into reverse gear, for the time being at least.

**By fundamentalist religion do you refer not only to Islam but also the Christian revival across the United States?**

Absolutely right. Something like a third of the continental United States is now a no-go zone for people of intelligence and goodwill. I think this is very scary indeed. The Waco, Texas, case was only the tip of an iceberg. You should know about the Church of Jesus Christ the Aryan, for example. They drill their children, as young as nine, before breakfast with loaded firearms. These are mainly based in Dakota, I believe. Some of them are really appalling. Some are so racist, they would literally still butcher black people who wandered into their area. It is not a good idea to enter that part of America if you are homosexual, if you have long hair and you're a man, or if you wear too short a skirt and you're a woman. These people are dedicated to a vision of an unreal world. Even for sf writers that is



always a very bad sign.

This again harks back to the "monkey" principle – because we can do something we must do it – but this is not wisdom. There is a definition of wisdom I came up with years ago for a story called *Enigma from Tantalus*: "If something happens twice, you can design a machine to cope, if it happens once you need a man." I defined a wise man as the guy who gets the right answer when something has never happened before. One problem we are facing – this is the collective "we" – is that we don't know how much we know. We have an enormous backlog of knowledge much of which is just mouldering. This is getting worse with the advent of the computer age. I personally would like to see, not so much a wholly rational world because that smacks of machinery and tyranny and whatever, but a *sensible* world. Basically as a species we are not sensible. We seem incapable of choosing right.

For example, there was a guy in America called Ted Taylor. He was a nuclear weapons designer. He went on working for ten or twelve years in this field. He knew it was wrong, he knew it was dangerous, but he was driven by the sheer intellectual fascination: redesigning the bomb, making the plutonium load smaller, that kind of thing. Years ago when I lived in London – 22 or 23 years ago –

I had on the wall of my study three pictures which I got from the 3M tape company, free as I recall, with a batch of recording tape. One showed a weather satellite orbiting Earth and one showed a satellite that we sent to Mars. The third was an aerial view of a Polaris missile being launched from underwater. People used to see this and say, "John, why have you got Polaris there?" A picture of Polaris being launched: such ingenuity devoted to such dreadful ends!

**I'm told you have the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament's circular badge as part of the Brunner family arms. Why is this?**

Let me explain the background. At Easter 1958, the CND symbol made its debut at a rally in Trafalgar Square, before the first march to the atomic-weapons centre at Aldermaston. The sign was designed by a Quaker, a sympathizer with the Direct Action Committee against Nuclear War, called Gerald Holtham. Do you know semaphore, flag-language? It's the two symbols of N and D, Nuclear Disarmament, superimposed. He put the sign in a ring to symbolize the world and sowed the background with streaks to symbolize fallout. (This design turned out to have meaning in runic symbolism: a broken cross with its branches down means death; a ring means an unborn child. So the

CND symbol means "death of an unborn child." Appropriate!)

The first time I ever saw this I said to myself, "That is perfectly heraldic!" The essence of a heraldic device is that it can be easily described and easily recognized at a distance, for instance on the field of battle. I resolved to incorporate it into my family arms. Eventually the year came when I had a couple of hundred pounds to spare and I went to the College of Arms. I had asked whether I might display a personal badge in place of my family crest and learned it was permissible. So I said, my family crest is an eagle's wing displayed in red with a fountain on it, so I want a green wing with a CND symbol on it. They didn't turn a hair. However, I wanted a Latin motto, *Absolute absoluta potentia corrumpit* ("absolute power corrupts absolutely," a Latinization of Lord Acton's dictum), and they said they don't grant mottos in dead languages any more without a special reason, so I had to settle for "Power corrupts."

**That still doesn't explain why you adopted a peace symbol as your badge.**

Basically, writing mainly about the future, I have a vested interest in there being a future worth writing about. You can only write the nuclear war story once and it always has the same ending. Boring!

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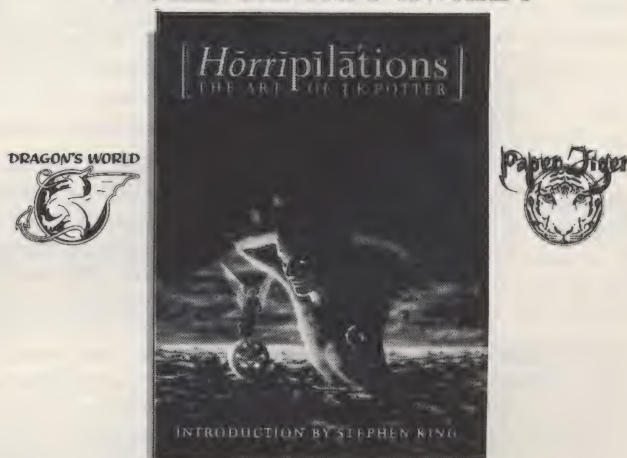
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**Sleazewatch.** SF conventions are rarely listed here: there are far too many, and the column space is needed for cheap sneers at my betters. But every man has his price. The 1997 British Eastercon (to be held in Liverpool) has overcome my scruples by a cunning strategy. Rush your £20 registration at once to "Intervention," 12 Crowsbury Close, Emsworth, Hants, PO10 7TS! Its guests are Brian Aldiss, Robert Silverberg and David Langford.

## WATCHERS OF THE DARK

**Ian Ballantine**, co-founder with Betty Ballantine of Ballantine Books in 1952, died in March after long heart trouble.

**Samuel R. Delany's** tongue-in-cheek ploy to improve the political correctness of his reissued porno epic *Equinox* (alias *The Tides of Lust*) is to make all its characters 100 years older. No one could possibly complain about explicit underage sex scenes involving – among others – a boy and girl aged respectively 113 and 115....

**John Gribbin** wrote with remarkable timing: "Does anyone care that my really rather good novel *Time Switch* is in limbo because an editor (alias Anne Editer) at Ringpull wants me to rewrite the characters to match her stereotypes of scientists instead of matching the kind of scientists I've worked with for 30 years?" Within days, developments at Ringpull put an end to his suspense: read on!

**Garry Kilworth** brags about the shortlisting of his sf novel *The Electric Kid* for the prestigious Lancashire County Library and Natwest Children's Book of the Year trophy.

**Charles Platt** featured in the debut issue of *Wired UK*, revealing his thrilling involvement in a high-profile Turing test where \$100,000 was offered for an AI program that convinced the judges it was a real person. None did, but by a cunning strategy of "being moody, irritable and obnoxious," Charles emerged as the "most human human" in the test (prize: a nice bronze medal). For next year's competition, AI programmers will surely take the hint and make their creations rude and annoying ... Artificial Platt.

**Andrew I. Porter**, editor of *SF Chronicle* and man of dignity, wishes the sf community to put away childish things such as calling him "Andy". Mr Porter is 49.

**Christopher Priest's** controversial polemic about *The Last Dangerous Visions* is apparently the first ever Hugo-nominated book whose full text (in negligibly different form) was freely available on Internet before book-format publication. Techno-geeks can still download it: anonymous FTP to ftp.dcs.gla.ac.uk, directory /pub/SF-

# Ansible



## David Langford

Archives/Misc, file  
Last\_Deadloss\_Visions-Chris.Priest ...

**Colin Wilson**, after nearly 20 years, has written a sequel to his sf novel *The Space Vampires*. But he's having difficulty in finding a publisher who will take it on, apparently because of its 250,000-word length. Which is strange, since the novelistic Fatness Factor is more often regarded as an asset.

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Glittering Pyrites.** Pat Cadigan became the first two-time winner of the Arthur C. Clarke award, receiving this year's £1,000 for her novel *Fools*. Greg Bear's *Moving Mars* collected the Nebula for best novel, and at the same ceremony Damon Knight was declared a Grand Master. The James Tiptree prize was jointly won by Nancy Springer's *Larque on the Wing* and Ursula Le Guin's "The Matter of Seggri" – this "gender-bending sf" award had not previously gone to a short story. The Philip K. Dick award judges chose Robert Charles Wilson's *Mysterium* as best original US sf paperback. And Iain M. Banks bagged the BSFA novel award for *Steampyde Tyetull*, as the cognoscenti like to call his *Feersum Endjinn*.

**Ringpull Press**, famous in sf for publishing Jeff Noon, went into voluntary liquidation after its unwise attempt to recoup six-figure debts with an instant book of philosophical profundities quoted from footballer Eric Cantona. (*Who he? – Ed.*) Alas, Headline were unamused to find that chunks had been swiped from *their* potboiler, the autobiographical *Cantona: My Story*, and they required Ringpull to reprint without the offending bits. The doubled printing bill tipped them over the edge. But though the company itself is bankrupt, Ringpull has moved *en masse* to

Fourth Estate – taking Noon and others with it – and will continue to operate from Manchester as a Fourth Estate imprint called "Ringpull."

**Hugos.** Shortlisted novels are: John Barnes, *Mother of Storms*; Michael Bishop, *Brittle Innings*; Lois McMaster Bujold, *Mirror Dance*; Nancy Kress, *Beggars and Choosers*; and James Morrow, *Towing Jehovah*. Here, with unashamed chauvinism, are some British items also on the ballot: Brian Stableford's "Les Fleurs du Mal" (novella), Christopher Priest's *The Book on the Edge of Forever* (nonfiction), Jim Burns (artist), *Interzone* (semiprozine) and *Ansible* (fanzine). Finalists in the related John W. Campbell Award for best new writer include – that man again – Jeff Noon.

**Villainy!** The chap who complained that the US Franklin Mint stole his *Star Trek* Tri-D chess rules to accompany their *Trek* chess set (see previous column) now reports even more bitterly that since he took legal action the Mint has been wickedly short-changing purchasers by shipping sets *without* his rules....

## "This ... Remarkable ... Book."

Mighty publisher Jim Baen plans a national US advertising campaign for Newt Gingrich's ghosted alternate-world sf novel *1945*. Supposedly he is basing the publicity on quotes "taken a tiny, tiny bit out of context" from sarky comments on advance extracts. (Anonymous spy David Drake says the book has since been overhauled and improved.) For example, the purple passage about a "pouting sex kitten" found "sitting athwart" the hero's chest provoked the critical dig, "an instant classic which will be draped athwart the Speaker's neck by his opponents in every election he runs in from now on." Baen claims to be quoting only the phrase "An instant classic!" ... and loudly hopes to get sued for it, since "The only thing I'm missing is the publicity of a court action."

**Revelation.** At a recent convention, convivial Ramsey Campbell was asked which UK editor caused him such pain over the first version of his novel *The Claw* – see Afterword in the 1992 reissue. "Wild horses would not make me admit it was Rosie Cheetham," he declared staunchly.

**SF Masterclass.** "Satisfied at seeing all of them go down, one by one, through his keyhole, Morgan, fully dressed but wearing only his socks, eased out of his room and down to Green's" (Jack Chalker, "Now Falls the Cold, Cold Night" in *Alternate Presidents*). Researcher David Bratman notes that nudism and the ability to squeeze through keyholes are features of Chalker's alternate 1856 not otherwise discussed in the story. ■



When Elizabeth Bazil heard of the electronic mirror, she had to have one. Elizabeth had reached the age of 41 with wealth, beauty, and remarkably little to vex her. Her body was her all-consuming work. Every hair, pore, every curve had been crafted to perfection.

Electronic mirrors have an advantage over traditional optical mirrors. You can see your back. You turn away from the mirror, say "Image now." A camera takes your image, you turn to face the mirror and you see your back. When you tell the mirror to display your front, you don't see a "mirror" image. The electronic mirror shows right as right and left as left (unless you tell it otherwise). The mirror can morph your image in any way you desire. It can show you fat or thin. It can coat you in minks, stain you with tattoos, or grace you with a grass skirt.

With the flash of her platinum credit card, an Eidolon™ electronic mirror was on its way to her palace in Russian Hill. It was installed while she was on an advertising shoot in Bimini, but when she got back she played with it for days. She dressed up her images, tried out different hair colours, different weights and heights and beauty marks. She morphed herself into Marilyn, deified herself as Botticelli's Venus, and even ruled as Nefertiti. In short she explored the age of electronic vanity the way we all have.

She was exploring the voice menu when she came across the GIF option. She could post electronic images of herself on the Internet. She knew there were already images of herself from various advertisements and modelling jobs, but this was a chance to post her image herself. This step of self-creation seemed very desirable to her. So after only a few days of getting the right look, she placed her image – her GIF – at several ftp sites around the globe. She also set up an account to get fan mail, which poured in.

This amused her for another week and then she asked the mirror how many GIF files were stored somewhere on the Internet. "Thirty-five million" answered the mirror. "How many human beings?" "Four million." "How many women?" "Three point five million." "How many living women?" "One point five million."

Then she asked, "Am I the most beautiful?"

The mirror silently compared the one point five million GIF files. After a few moments it said, "No. There is one more beautiful than you."

And Elizabeth Bazil's world was shattered.

"Who," she asked, "is the most beautiful one?"

"Helen Hornung."

"And where would I find Helen Hornung?"

"Helen heptagon dot com."

Elizabeth's mirror wasn't very bright but her PC was, and she was able to learn a great deal about Helen Hornung.

Helen's mother had been a receptionist for California Customized Face, a team of seven plastic surgeons – so popular in fact that when she discovered she was pregnant, she didn't know if the father was

# The Surgeons

Don Webb

Dr Hoffner, Dr Orville, Dr Rink, Dr Nance, Dr Uako, Dr Naville or Dr Gardiner. She presented her condition to all of them in the hope that one of them would step forward to make an honest woman out of her. What they did instead was present her with a trust and the initial letters of their last names. Little Helen began life rich and was now quite rich.

She was not however beautiful. She unfortunately took after her father. All of the surgeons had entered the field of plastic surgery out of a sense of being a loser at the genetic lottery. They were to a man short, dark, and misshapen – and it appeared their daughter if left to the whims of uncaring Nature, would be equally homely. However, their pride both parental and professional and their nationally renowned skill enabled them to overcome Nature's cruel dictates.

They made her better.

And better.

And now she was the most beautiful woman in the world, or at least among that class of women whose image was stored as a GIF file at a public access site.

If Elizabeth could buy the favours of the seven surgeons, then *she* would be the loveliest woman in the world.

Her first attempt was simple cash. After all there had been nothing in her life that she couldn't buy.

She made an appointment at California Custom Face. The little men measured her and tested her with lasers and sound waves and other tests too arcane to fathom. They told her that she was at her peak, they could change but not improve.

She felt strange leaving their office. It had seemed dark and cavernous as through she had visited some underground chamber filled with little men all shaking and nodding their heads as one. She was sure they were lying. They merely didn't want to challenge their greatest creation. If they could make a homely girl into a most beautiful woman in the world – think of what they could do with Elizabeth, who had been born beautiful! She would have them but she would need to get rid of Helen first.

That she was contemplating murder didn't seem strange to Elizabeth. She had always assumed that if you got what you wanted in the world it was inevitable that there would be at least one murder. There was a limited amount of good things in the



world, just not enough for everybody. It was the great truth that got people out of bed in the mornings, and made civilization generally possible.

She hired a private detective to gather info on Helen and the surgeons. They lived together without servant or security. Helen cooked and cleaned for the seven men, and during the day while they worked their fleshly miracles she remained at home reading, watching MTV, and doing aerobics. Elizabeth didn't know any woman with such a lifestyle, but the outrageous ratio of the household did at least give a comforting postmodern feel.

Elizabeth knew instinctively that Helen must be as vain as she – so it was against vanity that she made her first assault.

She set up a dummy corporation in Los Angeles, and shot some commercials for a new herbal shampoo. Elizabeth had connections with the best ad agencies, and she was able to get them to brew up their best black magic. The commercial made it very, very clear that without Hecate's Solution one simply could not have pretty hair. The orders began pouring in. Elizabeth's company sent out a re-bottled dishwashing soap – while watching for that one special address.

Elizabeth had had a very special potion made and mailed it to Helen Hornung when the order came in. It was a slow-acting poison which caused paralysis. Three maybe four shampoos and little Helen would be unable to move, and therefore doomed to a dreary life in some institution. The drug company which had made the poison was quite, quite sure that there was no antidote.

Elizabeth, assured that her only rival had been eliminated, returned to her normal pursuits. She figured that she wouldn't try to hire the surgeons right away. They would no doubt need several months of mourning. And it is a fitting thing that beautiful women should be mourned.

After being featured for the sixth time on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, Elizabeth felt it was time to check her beauty. So she asked of her mirror if she was indeed the prettiest woman alive.

"No," came the answer. "For although you are fair, Helen Hornung is fairer still."

Elizabeth set out to discover how Helen had avoided paralysis.

It was expensive to search through all the medical records of Los Angeles County, but money had become no object. Elizabeth was unused to obstacles in her life, and didn't know how to overcome them in a balanced manner.

Helen Hornung had indeed succumbed to paralysis. In fact the fit had come upon her at a Rodeo Drive boutique. She had been whisked to the hospital, but when the seven surgeons heard of it – they had her removed to their own clinic.

They had cancelled all of their appointments for a month. At the end of that time, Helen was once again seen on the streets of LA looking – if anything – slightly better than before.

This would not do.

Elizabeth's mistake had been relying on a poison. Poisons can be contained, neutralized, expelled. She needed something that would get to the core of Helen's life and beauty. She needed a virus.

So she studied.

She researched.

She found the best man working on recombinant DNA. She married him. He unfortunately had a conscience, so she dumped him and found the second-best man. In a year's time she had a slim vial full of the most carcinogenic virus ever known.

She went into the health-food business. She created a line of products advertised as so nutritious, so vital that any woman eating of them would be seven times more beautiful still. The ads were so powerful and so evilly constructed that once Elizabeth caught *herself* believing them.

Orders flowed in, and eventually that *special* order.

Elizabeth poured the virus direct into the apple sauce that went out.

At Helen's quarterly check-up, the surgeons found widespread cancer. Every system, every tissue, every fibre of her being bore at least a few thousand of the malignant cells. This was far beyond their medical art. It was far beyond that of any doctor on the planet. Within months Helen would become a mass of ugly cancer and die.

The eight of them spent many days discussing their options. One of the surgeons suggested that perhaps some future medicine could do what they could not. So they agreed to freeze her. Helen went into cryogenic suspension, with a detailed plaque explaining her illness, and the seven surgeons tried to reconstruct their lives.

It became easier for them a few months later when they got a wealthy and demanding client. They were able to work long and hard for Elizabeth Basil, and this hard work soothed the loss of their perfect creation. Elizabeth maintained her beauty without rival for 20 more years, but this exhausted even the art of the seven surgeons and she began to fade.

She retired to a monastery in New Tibet – undisturbed save for the occasional reporter writing a "Where Are They Now?" article.

As for Helen, she slumbered in the cold sleep long, long after the passing of mankind. A space-faring race from Sirius discovered her chamber. These creatures – a rough analogue to Earth's bees – were quite skilled in genetic manipulations. They were able to remove any trace of bad DNA from her. They were quite taken with her icy beauty and put in a few other genetic alterations as well.

They made her into their hive mother. So despite Elizabeth's manipulations, Helen became Queen at last.

**Don Webb's** last stories here were "Not of This World" (issue 56) and "Castalia" (issue 71). We're pleased to welcome him back. He continues to live in Texas, and his byline is to be seen with increasing frequency in a wide range of American magazines.



“E  
vening, Robson.”  
“Evening, Dr Jones.”

The scientist, white coated and bustling as though in deliberate self parody, was already disappearing down the corridor in the direction of his lab and Alan Robson spoke to his receding back, but he didn't mind. Alan had become a fixture in Number Three Block of the vast Quantum Cultures complex, patrolling in his laser tailored blue uniform: boots gleaming, cap the precise angle, stunner holstered at his side. And even the great Dr Jones knew his name! It was the happiest time of his life.

The laser field showed a vast field of corn, gently waving in the breeze to the sound of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. The smooth, confident voice of the presenter carried on:

“Quantum Cultures leads the planet in the production of engineered food to feed the starving millions of the Third World.” The scene changed to a blue underwater seascape and dolphins flashed by the camera, ripples of white sunlight playing on their flanks. They were moving around an underwater construction. “The symbionts developed in Quantum Culture's world-famous Sirius lab are already being used to great effect in enhancing the native intelligence of humanity's most faithful allies in the animal world.” Again the scene cut, this time to the panoramic shot of QC that had started the show, and the presenter concluded with a spiel about the firm's great contributions towards humanity being only the beginning. The picture faded, the lights came up and the trainee Alan Robson was left with a sense of awe that he should be doing his bit for this great organisation.

The biotech giant whose glittering glass headquarters took up the whole industrial estate outside the town had always been there in the background for as long as Alan had been alive. He had left school as a minor prodigy, a boy who had turned his back on the gangs and got educated, and in theory he had had the whole European Union in which to find a job. Or maybe he could have emigrated to one of the sea colonies.

In reality he had known it would be in his home town, and if it wasn't to be a waiter in a fast food restaurant, or an odd-job man, it would be with the people who actually kept the town in money; the people who dominated the place, who took all the talent into their bosom. It was so inevitable, it wasn't even depressing.

The training had been dull, but he had got through it, and that unfortunate little incident with the dogs had merely resulted in a dry comment in his file that he was not suited for the canine division. It was long and boring work, but it paid well. It didn't matter that Quantum Cultures was vast and impersonal. He served it well and it looked after him.

He was told, by the people around him and by *Cultured People*, the company magazine, that biotechnology was *the* new thing, helping clean up the spills

# THE ROBSON STRAIN

*Ben Jeapes*



and spoils and excesses of the 20th century. QC was making the world better to live in, and he was a part of it. He was on nodding terms with doctors, professors, *scientists*, who had come to know and like him; a decent, quiet, discreet type, who in a bygone age might have taken elocution lessons and risen to be a gentleman's gentleman.

Oh, there were video cameras, robots... but cameras could be blanked by intruders, robot could have their software scrambled. The late-20th-century flirt with electronic technology was over and now QC's philosophy was to rely on human beings. They had found that the right type of human rewarded trust with loyalty, and Alan was a prime specimen of the type.

He had first heard of Jones on his third day on the job. It was 8:30 in the morning and he and a party of guards had been ordered to the front gate.

They heard the shouts well in advance of their arrival; there was a demonstration going on outside. Alan strained to read one of the placards, though it was jiggling up and down as its holder was jostled in the crowd. GOD'S CREATION. He had heard of these people and already gathered that "God's Creation" was a phrase it was best not to mention at work.

There were others: NAZIS OUT. What was the relevance? Another one: *SOMETHING GO HOME*. He spelt out the first word silently. M-E-N-G-E-L-E. He pronounced it *Mengeel* to himself and wondered what it meant.

There were other placards, biblical quotations which meant nothing to him. Orders were shouted. He and his fellows were to link arms and make a secondary line of defence some 30 yards inside the gate. The perimeter men, dogs barking angrily and straining at the leash (huge great brutes, too – he eyed them nervously), were making a very effective first line. The gate was open, hence the need for guards: they were expecting someone.

At last the cause of all this trouble arrived – a sleek, armoured limo that made its way through the jeering, angry crowds; through the gate and past the guards, who opened up their line for it. Alan later gathered that this was a daily occurrence when the car's occupant, Dr Nicholas Jones, arrived for work, and normally it was quite routine.

Then the engine stalled.

The crowd pressed forward with a roar once it realized that its prey was helpless. It was a second ahead of the guards who collapsed at the sudden surge. Then the protesters were around the car, rocking it.

Alan was already running forward. His stunner was still too new a fixture about his person for him to think of drawing it as the old rumbling instincts took over. He heard the smash of a car window as he came to the first of the protesters. A blow to the man's kidneys made the fellow shriek and collapse.

Next. Someone was just turning to face Alan. A fist into the man's stomach, another into his face as he doubled over. Two down. The third loomed in front of him and both Alan and the other froze.

"Al?" Rick was a lot taller now, of course; more muscular, confident in the protection of his old mate,

and all of a sudden the veneer of respectability, even thinner than the fabric of Alan's uniform, was torn away and they were on the same side again, working the streets. "How's it–"

Alan put all his weight behind the blow, feeling the skin on his knuckles rip as Rick staggered back into the crowd with blood spurting from his nose. For a moment, a brief moment, Alan had been terrified that they *were* on the same side again, that all his efforts of the last ten years had been for nothing, and it was that terror which drove the blow. *That* was for his past. Alan carried on into the crowd.

They had Jones out of the car now; Alan could hear his yelling – enraged, not frightened. Alan was surrounded; arms and hands were grabbing hold of him. He dimly heard a cry from one of the other guards, outside the throng:

"Robson! Stunner!"

And he remembered.

A fist came flashing towards his face; he moved his head to one side to let the blow pass. His right hand was pinioned but he managed to reach over with his left and grab the stunner at his hip.

He let the first man have it at point-blank in the chest. The man arched over backward to be caught by his companions, quivering spastically. Another shot, and another. Alan had the stunner in his right hand now and he fanned it to and fro, working his way towards the now prone Jones. The attackers were already scattering and the guards had regrouped for an all-out charge. Jones was left alone and Alan helped him up.

Jones was a gangly man with a balding, pointed head. He already had a swelling black eye and a gash on his forehead, but he managed to smile.

"Thank you, Horatius," he said, "very noble." He took a step and winced, and Alan had to catch him. "Help me to the guard house, will you? They've got a first aid kit there..."

Naturally, Jones was too high up, or too busy, or both, to express his gratitude in person but the Head of Security called Alan to his office to congratulate him. One of the cameras over the gate had caught it all and the Head played it back for him. Alan was quite impressed, despite himself.

"You were in the gangs, weren't you, Robson?" the Head said, looking not at Alan but at his laser image viciously kneeling one of the God's Creationers in the groin.

"Yes, sir."

"What happened to get you out?"

"Nothing, sir." Well, quite a big thing – big enough to make him renounce his old life and strive for respectability – but he had shut that memory away and had no intention of calling it up again.

The Head looked at him thoughtfully. "Well, you're on the right side, I suppose that's what counts. You may have gathered Dr Jones is a big name here, Robson. This could be quite a break."

There had been one slightly puzzling sequel as well. Alan had been walking round a corner and quite



innocently bumped into Dr Thompson. Thompson was also a big name at QC – almost, but not quite, as big as Jones, and that “almost” rankled. Alan apologized quickly as Thompson staggered back.

“Ah, the newcomer!” Thompson said, recovering. “The local hero! Forgetting us ordinary mortals already, eh?”

“Sir?” Alan said, baffled.

“On the old patrician’s guard, eh? Don’t worry, Robson. Jones takes good care of everyone hanging onto his coat-tails and once you’re there you can well and truly forget how mere humans act. You’ll soon forget that the laws of normal social decency ever applied to you.”

And he went off down the corridor, with Alan looking after him in frank bewilderment.

*At 12 he was the youngest and smallest of the Street Eagles, and so naturally he was chosen. It was his initiation.*

*“Go into that house,” Rick, the chief, said casually, “and open the front door for us.” The other two, Steve and Olly, looked on, impassive.*

*It was a nice house in a nice part of town. The Street Eagles thought big – Rick’s philosophy was that the people around here took such precautions against marauding gangs and full-size rumbles in their district that they would never notice a small group of four boys.*

*“Might be wired,” Alan had said.*

*“Might be,” Rick had agreed, holding Alan’s gaze. He had slapped a small plastic box into Alan’s hand. “This’ll help.”*

*So Alan had done it.*

*The window at the back had indeed been wired, but there were ways round that which he had been taught long ago. Once he was in he made his way slowly – very, very slowly – through the house, navigating by sense of direction and feel. An aerosol spray showed the laser lines that he had better not break; the magic box in his hand sent signals to the house computer that overrode the panicked warnings of the motion detectors and pressure pads on the floor. Rick’s dad moved in an elevated criminal stratum and had access to such toys.*

*The hall was well-lit by the street lamps beaming in through the windows around the door, and so the last stretch of Alan’s journey to the front door was easy. He opened it and waited for the others. They slid across the lawn like ghosts.*

*“Cool.” Rick threw a playful punch to his shoulder. Steve just grinned as he went in to the house. Olly stopped to ruffle his hair.*

*“Well done, little bro,” he said.*

*“Don’t call me that,” Alan said. Olly grinned and went on in, and Alan shut the door.*

Three years after his first meeting with Jones, Alan was on the night shift, patrolling the dimly lit deserted corridors or keeping a close eye on the banks of monitors in the guardroom.

The Sirius lab was a hive of activity at one in the morning; it usually was. Alan sometimes wondered

when Jones and his staff slept. He thought he would stroll over and pay his respects; remind Jones *et al.* that they were in good hands.

His hand was on the door when pandemonium erupted within – people shouting, and the most terrifying screams that Alan had ever heard. He pulled his stunner out of its holster with one practised movement and burst in through the doors.

“Catch her!” Jones bellowed. Alan was so taken aback that he forgot to shoot.

He could have sworn that a small, hairy dwarf was running at him, and he yelled. It had been making for the door, pursued by Jones and his lab team. Alan’s sudden appearance and shout startled it as much as it had startled him, and it changed direction.

It had taken one second. Reality and Alan’s perception of it aligned themselves properly, and Alan saw what was happening. The dwarf was a chimpanzee, and it was the one doing the screaming. It was one of the lab animals and it had escaped. It was almost comical.

Maybe not. It had jumped up on to one of the benches and was running along it, knocking equipment on to the ground with heart-rending crashes.

“Over there!”

“Stop her, for God’s sake!”

Alan’s most obvious contribution was still in his hand. He aimed it with care at the chimp, but the humans were in the way now and the auto-aim, programmed to target a man-shape, was confused. Alan flicked it off and aimed again. Jones, who seemed to be the calmest one present, saw him out of the corner of his eye.

“Half power, man!” he called. “She’s not a human!” Alan blinked and adjusted the setting.

The chimp had reached one of the ladders leading up to the catwalk above and was swarming up it. One of the men started after her and Jones grabbed him.

“No, don’t do that.” He turned to Alan. “Get her, Robson.” Alan aimed carefully and pulled the trigger. The stunner buzzed and the chimp convulsed with one last scream. Then she fell gracelessly into the waiting arms of the men below her.

Jones took time to come over. “Well done, Robson. Good shot.”

“Thank you, sir.” Alan felt emboldened to ask, “what happened?”

“Oh, we got the strength wrong,” Jones said enigmatically.

“Caused quite a mess, sir,” Alan said sympathetically. Jones looked around, seeing the extent of the damage for the first time.

“Christ almighty,” he moaned. Alan guessed it wasn’t just a case of tidying up and giving the floor a good vacuum.

“Dr Jones!” One of the technicians was standing by a rack of smashed glass implements. Jones bellowed and ran over to it. Fluid was dripping onto the floor.

“Gone?” Jones said, as though the one word was causing him physical pain.

“Every one, sir,” the tech said. The others gathered round and stared at the wreckage. Alan was familiar enough about the lab work to know that the rack



was important. He had several times seen Jones shout at someone who gave it even a jostle.

"The cultures," Jones was wailing. "The cultures."

It was as though every man had suffered a bereavement. They stood and stared hopelessly; every now and then, one of them would move as if to say something.

"All because we thought the bloody animal was ready for it," Jones said.

"We still have the other batches in the safe," someone said.

"Yes, yes, yes, but... oh, sod it, we'll have to write this lot off, and that means revising—"

"Or getting another volunteer," a man said.

"Yes, but it takes hours for the imprinting to take effect. We'd need someone *now*..."

He trailed off. Alan waited innocuously a short distance away from the group. Then, as though they were puppets, they turned to him and smiled. Alan's hackles rose.

"Robson, old chap," Jones said, "how would you like to do your bit for Quantum Cultures?"

"Me, sir?"

"You! Do you know what we're doing here, Robson?"

"Ah — not really, sir."

"I'll explain."

Maybe what followed was an explanation. The words "virus" and "intelligence" and "symbiont" popped up a lot. It was something to do with artificial minds, in a dish. Jones' viruses formed their own network in a mammalian brain: chemical signals passed around it and simulated the firing of neurons in the mind. Introduced into an animal's brain, these viruses would work with the creature's own instincts with the effect of apparently enhancing its intelligence. Alan thought of the dolphins in the induction video, the chimps that you often saw helping construction crews nowadays...

"The thing is, Robson," Jones was saying, "the viruses on their own don't know what to do. If we just pumped them into the creature's brain then they would form their own random paths and the creature would go mad, or have its brain short circuited. They need to know how to grow, like a neural network in a computer — they aren't programmed so much as trained. And for that the viruses need to be... um, kick-started, as it were, by a human mind."

"You mean the animal would think like me?" Alan said, awed despite himself.

"Oh, that's an old wives' tale," Jones said impatiently. "No, it won't. But it will have your *instincts*. Do you have a favourite piece of music? Then the animal will react to it, though it won't know what music is. It will be like you were if you were a new-born baby. Your instincts and the animal's, combined."

"Why me, sir?" Alan asked.

"We're still calibrating," Jones said. "The cultures for this batch have had all our own minds imprinted on them and I don't want to use the same old data. I want a *new* mind."

"Ah, Dr Jones?" One of the others had a hand raised and Jones looked at him with wary patience. It was Dr Thompson, and there was just a hint of

polite disdain in the man's voice. "Ah, Doctor, with respect, Mr Robson is a random element. We don't know him or his mind—"

"For pity's sake," Jones snorted, "he'll have been screened when he joined the firm and his psych profile will be on file with all the others. It'll just be in a different place, that's all. Look, I'll show you."

"Come to think of it," Jones added as he sat at the nearest terminal, "I don't know why we didn't think of this before. Why on earth were we profiling all our volunteers when the firm's already done it for us? Can't see the wood for the trees. See, Robson? You've already made a contribution to science."

Alan smiled weakly.

It took a while because none of them were familiar with accessing the personnel records — and none thought to ask Alan — and only Jones, as a director, had the authority to get the information they wanted anyway, but eventually Alan's psych profile was displayed for all to see.

"See?" Jones said. "We have all the calibration data we need. He's a well-balanced, ordinary chap." He grinned at Alan. "Wouldn't you say so, Robson?"

"Um—" Alan began.

"With," said Thompson, still studying the display, "a pathological fear of dogs."

For the first time Alan felt a stab of anger. He didn't like being discussed like a lump of dead meat and the incident with the dogs was something that still made him sweat.

"Hmmm?" Jones looked at the display again. His eyes darted along the lines of text on the display and his lips moved as he murmured, "When asked to take the leash of one of the German Shepherds, the subject froze and would not move. His vital signs indicated severe panic. The subject is unwilling to discuss this fear of dogs and it is therefore recommended..." Hmph. Don't blame him. They're loyal servants, but whoever coined the phrase 'nice doggy' was a fool. The brutes only serve the pack... blow that, Thompson. He'll do."

"And prone to nightmares," Thompson continued, as though relishing the words on the display. Alan could have hit him.

"He'll do!" Jones said.

"And... dear me, a number of minor convictions." This was now open enjoyment. "Petty theft, assault, suspected—"

Jones favoured the display with one last glance. "The last of which was when he was 15!" he said. "Robson will do, and that is the end of the conversation!"

"Yes, Dr Jones." Thompson acceded, making no secret of his triumph. Jones put a hand on Alan's arm.

"This way, please, Robson." He sensed the slight resistance. "Come on, man, it's completely harmless."

"Really, sir?"

"Really. Even easier than giving blood. You give blood, don't you?"

Alan didn't have time to reply that, no, he had never had the chance. He was sat down and small pickups were attached to his temples. His eyes widened in alarm. It was too much like the horror videos he had been so fond of as a youngster.



"Five seconds, that's all," Jones said. And it was. There wasn't even a buzz, or a flashing generator, or any of what Alan thought of as the standard paraphernalia. "There, didn't hurt, did it? Did you get the recording?" The last question was addressed to someone behind Alan.

"Yes, Doctor. Perfect."

"Good! Imprint a new culture, we'll get a good night's sleep, and when we're ready for work again the culture will be ready for us. Thank you, Robson, you've been a great help." Jones lent forward to remove the pickups.

"Than—" the words dried in Alan's mouth. For a brief moment, as Jones loomed over him, his head was silhouetted against one of the ceiling lights. His features vanished and there was just a dark shape. A pointed head with big ears.

Alan was in a daze as they bade him goodnight. He could hardly bear to turn his back on them to walk out of the lab. He strove to be nonchalant as long as he was in their view. His grin was agonizingly fixed.

Once out in the corridor again, he could allow himself the luxury of thought. It couldn't be, couldn't be—

That silhouette had been lurking at the bottom of his mind all this time and now the banished horror of that night welled up out of his memory.

*The light came on.*

*Alan actually yelped. A man stood at the top of the stairs, a black, dressing-gowned shape against the light behind him, flanked by two large dogs. Dobermans. The four boys stood, frozen, already sizing up the opposition. Rick was pawing at his jacket for his gun: the man raised an arm and, though they still could not see his face properly, they saw the powerful-looking weapon — a standard, dom-defence hand-piece typical of a middle class householder — all too well. A red spot from the gun's laser sight glowed directly over Rick's heart. Rick's hand fell back down to his side.*

*One of the dogs growled.*

*"Boys, boys," the man said scornfully. The boys stood their ground. Alan couldn't take his eyes off the dogs. They were huge. And why hadn't they barked? Why—*

*The man was coming down the stairs, a mobile silhouette with the dogs at his heel. Alan was reminded of Dracula — a tall, thin shape, and Alan mentally superimposed bat wings on the protruding ears. The laser sight flickered from one boy to another.*

*"Sweepings of the street," the man said. "No hoppers. Useless, good for nothings. Parasites."*

*They watched him approach.*

A pointed head, and two big ears...

Jones obviously didn't recognize him. Why should he? Alan would have been just one frightened boy — a scruffy, nondescript fledgling punk.

But did he, Alan, recognize him? Jones was... Jones was a good man, which is to say, he was central to QC, and QC's work was good... And Alan had only seen him — that man — once, a long time ago.

But, now that for the first time he was taking time

out to recall the events of that night, calmly and deliberately, and now that he knew what Jones' work entailed...

He remembered the next words the man in the house had spoken, and to whom they had been addressed.

Alone in the guardroom, Alan sat at the computer and called up Jones' file — his security code had no problem with getting simple names and addresses. He looked at the address.

It was completely wrong. Jones wasn't the man.

He sat back and smiled in relief. Shaking his head at himself, he decided he was obviously tired. He needed a coffee.

He was half out of his seat when he remembered. Jones had got married recently — it had been in *Cultured People*. Married people often moved house, and the data on file now was his current address. Anyway, the business had been ten years ago. It took a minute's searching to get Jones' old details out of the machine.

Alan didn't know how long he stared at the display. When he eventually glanced at the clock, he saw that almost an hour had passed since he had left the lab. Jones had been almost leaving when Alan last saw him, and would probably be at home by now.

He had no idea what he was doing. It seemed that a stranger picked up the phone with a shaking hand, checked that vision was off, pressed "9" for an outside line, and said Jones' number out loud.

The phone rang once. Jones probably had a bedside phone.

"Jones here." Alan didn't know what to say to the familiar voice. "Hello? Jones here."

"You bastard," Alan said. "You... bastard."

"Oh God, not another... how did you get this number? I'm ex-directory."

"You... you..." Alan stuttered.

*Click.*

Alan was left staring at the receiver. He replaced it... then picked it up and spoke the number for Jones' private line, the number of which glowed in front of him. The direct, untappable line from QC to Jones' home.

"Jones."

"You don't get away that easily, you bastard," Alan said gleefully. His acquired accent was lapsing, slipping back into its street original. His "r"s were rolling and he was swallowing his consonants. He didn't notice.

There was a pause while Jones digested the knowledge that someone at QC was making this call.

"Who are you?" Jones said flatly.

"Ten years ago, your house in River Park. Four kids got in—"

"Oh." Jones didn't seem ready to say anything more.

"You remember?"

"Of course I remember. You're referring to the outcome of the experiment? IQ enhancement, series one?"

"Experiment?" Alan screeched. "You—"

"I remember four street trash," Jones said levelly. "Scum of the earth. Face it, what kind of future did any of you have? By the law of averages you should all have been dead in another three, four years anyway. Congratulations on still being alive, by the way. But then, if you're calling from QC, you must be bet-



ter than I gave you credit for, eh? Better than most of the little people."

Alan bit his tongue against the instinctive "Thank you, sir" that came to mind. "They were sum... simbo... viruses, weren't they? Your cultures, you injected them into the dogs—"

"The word is symbionts. Very good. If it's any consolation, I didn't expect them to go as far as they did. I went off dogs after that. Nasty things. And they got encephalitis and had to be destroyed. We've come a long way since then, learnt how to make the effect long term—"

It was a standing joke that Jones was ready to talk about his work to anyone, and apparently that even included nuisance callers. Alan interrupted. "Where did you get them from? People? Did you kill someone else—"

"Oh, God, not that old slander again. No, I didn't. The viruses were grown in cultures in the Sirius lab, quite legally. I got them imprinted from volunteers as I have always done. It was only the gutter press and God's bloody Creation that decided I was the new Mengele, experimenting on human beings. Now, I don't know who you are, and I'm not going to try and find out. This time. Just think about it. Think about the favour I did you. Goodbye."

For the second time, the phone went dead on Alan. He didn't try a third time.

The moment Alan put the phone down he broke out into a sweat. How stupid could he have been? To have called Jones on the QC line in the middle of the night, when security would know exactly who had been in and who hadn't... Jones had only to ask... shouldn't be too difficult... and it would come down to *him*, Alan Robson, golden boy of the security division.

But if Jones complained then he, Alan, could say what he knew...

He could prove nothing...

So why should Jones complain?...

It still boiled down to the fact that Alan Robson was a bloody idiot. He stuffed his fingers into his mouth and wailed.

He spent the next couple of shifts lying low, as best he could, trying to avoid Jones. Just in case... But at every idle moment his thoughts returned to the matter, thrashing out the pros and cons to the satisfaction of his subconscious.

He felt no sympathy – not any more. This was a conclusion that Alan reached after several bouts of insomnia, and it surprised him. He felt no sympathy, indeed, for any of the Street Eagles who had raided Jones' house that night; including the 12-year-old Alan Robson. They were strangers. He had begun to see them in much the same way as Jones. Losers. No hopers. Scum. What had Jones said? "Little people."

It was too much to take in, and Alan never had the time to think it all through properly.

*The disappearance made minor news, but the police knew better than to look too deep. All four Street Eagles already had records and their type vanished*

*all too often, usually when they offended someone they shouldn't have. It happened. The only way to avoid it was to keep well out, and the boys were all well in.*

Alan was made to swear, using the Street Eagles' most terrible oath, that he would keep quiet. It didn't stop him from calling the police anonymously and saying he had seen four boys go into the house that night, and only three leave. After all, there were other reasons why a boy could disappear and gang war was just one of them; another common reason for vanishing was close enough to decent society for the police to take an interest. Alan dropped just enough hints, and the police investigated.

Alan made sure he just happened to be passing the house when the police arrived – two, in a semi-armoured police cruiser. One of them walked up the path and rang the bell, and Alan heard the dogs inside barking. The door opened and the man came out. He was too far away for Alan to make out his features. The two chatted while the dogs played on the lawn. The policeman was invited in. He came out half an hour later, shook hands with the man and rejoined his comrade in the car. They drove off, and that was the end of the police investigation.

It was three weeks later. Alan had gone back to day shift for a fortnight and now was back on nights again. As usual, Jones and his team were working late, and Alan was still avoiding the lab as much as possible. The few times he had seen Jones since, the scientist had been positively jovial – almost friendly. Alan was not apparently under suspicion. Had Jones actually meant that bit about not trying to find out?

He was in the Block Three guardroom when the alarm went off – a hideous screeching that shocked him to his feet and had him running for the door in a moment, along with the two other guards present. A voice was bellowing out of their radios.

"Major security breach. Repeat, major security breach. Intruders are past the perimeter in sector three and heading for the main complex. Believed to be armed."

The security division wasn't trained or equipped for all-out assaults, and this was more than the usual ragtag bunch of God's Creationers. They had assembled outside the fence and burst through by sheer strength of numbers. Sometimes a guard got close enough to use his stunner but by that time he would be well within range of the far more effective firearms that the attackers carried. The much-vaunted dog division had been wiped out.

Half way there, Alan and his group met a group of guards coming in the other direction. The Head of Security was with them.

"We can't push them out of the grounds," he said. "The police are coming but we've got to hold on in here. We're sealing all exits and windows. It's a cert they'll be heading for the Sirius lab. You lot, take the west side of level four. I'll send reinforcements up. Shoot at any non-QC personnel you see, ask questions later and don't be too picky about stunner settings."

The block was set into the side of a hill and level four was actually at ground level. Alan found him-



self part of a group of ten running towards the glass-sided gallery that ran along the entire west side, but they were too late. They heard the smash of glass as the attackers gained entry.

They burst into the gallery to face a group of 20 or 30 strangers, dressed in black with masks over their faces. The strangers opened fire even as they were pulling their stunners out. Two men were cut down immediately and the other guards, Alan among them, beat a retreat back into the corridor.

It was a good fight – the kind of rumble that Alan could have expected if he had stayed with the gangs. The difficulty was that the guards had had no training in close quarter fighting with weapons, and the attackers had. Their machine pistols rattled in short, lethal bursts: sometimes the guards were under cover, but the enemy knew how to use ricochets to drive them back just as effectively.

The guards managed to hold a bend in the corridor: the attackers were about 40 yards into the complex. Suddenly the shooting stopped.

"What –" Alan said, and was knocked flat by a massive explosion from around the corner. A cloud of debris and smoke blew round the bend. They picked themselves up gingerly.

"Think they've blown themselves up?" one of the others said.

"Dunno," Alan said. It suddenly dawned on him, for the first time, that he was the senior guard present. The others were all looking at him. He looked back at them, then at the corner of the wall that hid whatever had happened from view, and shrugged.

"Fuck it." He took his cap off and, holding it by the rim, poked it out past the bend.

Nothing happened.

He looked at the others again and replaced his cap. "All together," he said, gripping his stunner with both hands. They did likewise. "Count of three. One, two, three!"

As one they jumped around the bend, stunners raised and blazing. Apart from a lot of debris, the corridor was deserted.

"Where did they –" Alan started. Then he saw that the debris surrounded a hole in the floor. The attackers had simply blasted their way into level three – the level that gave access to the lab.

"Bastards!" he yelled. "Come on." They dropped down through the hole to level three, 15 feet below. As they ran to the lab, they heard shouts and noises of destruction. It was like the night that the chimp had got free, but much, much worse.

The guards hesitated outside the Sirius lab.

"Listen to that!" one of them hissed.

"We ought to get 'em," Alan said.

"They've got guns, sir", said another, respectfully.

"Police'll be here in a minute," said someone else.

Alan ground his teeth, only too aware that in the lab those filth, those animals, were attacking his beloved Quantum Cultures, destroying the work that he was meant to be protecting, and that he was cowering impotently in the corridor outside.

"Think we could get up onto the catwalk?" someone suggested. "Shoot down at 'em–"

A particularly loud crash sounded inside and Alan saw red. His fury peaked, and before the others could react he was in through the door.

He had time to take in the group of scientists, Jones among them, cowering in the corner under armed guard, and the other attackers moving around the lab, wreaking destruction. He raised his stunner and brought one down.

Then a burst of bullets caught him full in the chest and flung him back against the doors.

Darkness. Blurs of light, far above. Ceiling lights.

Pain. Immense, body wracking pain. And numbness too. Numbness to kill the pain.

Figures. Crowding round, bending over.

"Quick! Get the equipment over here!"

"Dr Jones, I –"

"He's almost dead, dammit! We won't get another chance! Do it!"

A pointed head, and big ears. Should react. A hand holding his, patting it. "You poor old sod, you didn't deserve this. You were so perfect! So perfect –"

"Equipment's ready, Dr Jones."

"Good. Bring it here..."

Nothing.

*"Hey, there's four of us, mister!" Olly said loudly. Alan felt a thrill of pride as his brother spoke out. "And you won't shoot, and those big bow-wows don't scare me."*

*"The one in the cap," the man said. "Take him."*

*The dogs pounced –*

*Somehow, amidst the panic and the screaming, Alan and Steve and Rick got the front door open and they were fleeing, fleeing from the ravening monsters, and Olly was lying on the floor, a mauled mess of a human being, and his blood was spurting red all over and he was howling in despair and terror, and then his voice choked into a gurgle as one of the dogs tore out his throat and he died.*

*The three survivors vanished into the darkness.*

There are people all around; he savours the smells of them. The smells are all interesting, but the part of his mind that is trained to scan everything finds nothing threatening. None of the smells, sounds or images registers as Enemy. The people get the benefit of the doubt.

The Man is standing by him, one hand absently scratching between his ears. He sits still, next to the Man, because this is what the Man wants him to do and the Man is his leader. The Man is the pack.

There is empty space all around them; ahead is what he recognizes as an obstacle course. The people are in rows all around and he smells their excitement.

"And now," says a loud voice, "Herod."

"Go, boy, go!" the Man says, slipping his leash for him.

Herod goes.

The empty ground blurs beneath him as he covers it in seconds. Scattered around him are lumps of raw, red steak, enticing and tender, but Herod ignores them because that is what the Man wants him to do.



*"Herod has never seen this particular layout before –"*

The maze. Herod's nose follows the stream of fresh air through it, and when he emerges he knows from its noise that the crowd is applauding.

*"Ladies and gentlemen, Herod is coming to the simulated minefield. If he hits a mine then a bell will ring and he will, of course, be disqualified–"*

Herod's eyes pick out the slight disturbances in the soil and he swerves around them.

*"The next area is protected by lasers. Again, breaking one will ring a bell –"*

– but Herod knows that if he breaks one of the thin, red lines then he will let the Man down, so he doesn't.

*"The final test. You see ten volunteers, all well protected. Herod hasn't met any of them before, but he has been shown the picture of one of them, who has been identified as bad. See what happens –"*

More people are looming ahead, and Herod automatically scans their faces through his memory –

The third from the left! Something explodes in Herod's mind; a whole new set of instructions as he throws himself at the Enemy. The Enemy is knocked to the ground as Herod leaps and his teeth are scrabbling at the Enemy's throat. Herod is unable to understand why they don't sink into the juicy, succulent flesh.

Then the Man is at Herod's side, his leash is attached, he is being dragged away. Herod doesn't understand, he is puzzled, but it is what the Man wants. Herod can smell the fear of the Enemy, who is being helped away by the others. The others have their teeth showing.

*"As you have just seen, he is completely safe except for a clearly identified target –"*

"Well done, boy, well done!" the Man whispers, easily loud enough for Herod to hear over the roar of the crowd. "You've sold 'em. You really have."

Herod is led through the crowds back to the pens, and though he smells fear on some of the people, he knows none of them are Enemy.

Herod keeps checking. It is his purpose.

*"Excellent! Absolutely excellent! They'll be queuing up to buy it! The Robson strain?"*

Herod only registers the words out of the babble of voices around him because another voice answers it, and a rush of love goes through him. The voice that replies is on a par with the Man; though Herod is sure he has never heard it before, that voice is all that is good in the world and it is coming closer. The scent Herod doesn't know, but the voice... ah, the voice...

*"Of course," it says. "The second batch."*

*"Ah."* Herod has their scents identified now and he smells uncertainty in the first speaker. *"You know, Nick, there may be a bit of trouble about that if it gets out..."*

The two are almost on top of him now, the voices louder.

"George, Robson was still alive when the police arrived." The loved voice is emphatic. "Just. He was unconscious and dying, and he was dead by the time he reached hospital. The first imprint I took off him,

as a volunteer, worked so beautifully I just had to get a second imprint. He wouldn't have minded."

"No?"

"Absolutely not. I took a closer look at his psychological profile after the first imprint went so well. He was a very simple man, you know, which is why he was so ideal. Uncluttered up top. Not that bright, but competent, and he lived and breathed Quantum Cultures. We were his life and he would have given his soul to help us. You saw Herod! That dog has all of Robson's love and loyalty for this place. We could do with more like him. And, here he is!"

Herod's tail wags and he looks up at the owner.

**TREACHERY!**

For there is no mistaking that silhouette. The Enemy has stolen that voice and is using it. The Enemy! Herod bares his teeth and he launches at the Enemy's neck.

Herod is choking and being dragged down to earth again. The Man has tightened Herod's choke leash and is crouching before him, brandishing the leather handle in front of his eyes.

"Bad dog! Bad dog!"

Herod has upset the Man and he is sorry. Herod is confused. The Enemy is there, next to the Man, but Herod has been bad. Herod doesn't understand. Herod crouches on the floor, feigning abjection, yet glowering at the Enemy, waiting for him to make a move.

"I'm so sorry, Dr Jones," the Man says. "He's never been like that before. He must hate you."

"Yes." The Enemy looks down at Herod. There is a spark of recognition and Herod knows that contact has been made. The Enemy did not know him for who he was, but now that has changed. They understand each other.

Strangely, Herod doesn't smell fear.

"Yes," says the Enemy, "he must."

Later, in the pens, the Man is friendlier again. Herod has been forgiven. The Man is rubbing Herod's chest, sending sensual waves through his body. The Man's tone is kind.

"Watcha do that for, you great mutt? Attacking Dr Jones like that, with the MD looking on? What were you up to, hey? Hope they don't recall the Robson strain because of you, boy."

The Man stops his rubbing to scratch his own head.

"Nah. It's all over the Union by now, anyway. Too late to do anything about it."

The words mean nothing, but the concept forms. Herod is one of a pack. The pack, as packs should be, is out there, waiting. It will support and help its brother. One day the Enemy will encounter another pack member. And if that fails, another. And another.

The pack will not forget the Enemy.

**Ben Jeapes** reports that his second-to-last story for us, "The Data Class" (IZ 80), was reprinted in the first issue of *Cyberdreams*, a new French sf magazine, where it rubbed shoulders with pieces by William Gibson, David Brin and other well-known sf writers. Ben lives and works in Abingdon, Oxfordshire, but continues to pop up all over the place.





Nick Lowe

# MUTANT POPCORN

**H**ello, <firstname>! Welcome to CineMatic™, the screenwriting system that frees up your creativity to help you, <fullname>, to script your inner movie. Harnessing advanced expert-system techniques originally developed to assist Shuttle astronauts working with their brains in free fall, CineMatic™ is the writing partner that never surfs a deadline, comes on embarrassingly to your girlfriend, or turns up drunk on your doorstep mumbling about stealing his talent by hypnosis. CineMatic™'s intuitive questionnaire-based interface makes writing the next *Hoop Dreams* as natural as therapy – and almost as affordable! Unlike rival screenwriting programs hacked out in a weekend to play a sucker market of hopeless aspirants mug enough to believe talent can be purchased on 3.5" floppies, CineMatic™ uses completely mechanical algorithmic modelling of dependably predictable formulae to generate movies that are written *entirely by numbers*. Use CineMatic™'s powerful ReWrite™ tool at any point to tweak your screenplay as it develops. Type ENOUGH or hit Enter to dismiss this message.

OK

*Please wait for several minutes*

**YOUR TITLE.** You may not think it, but the title can be the most

important part of a movie! How many people would pay to see *Die Hard: With a Vengeance* if it was released under its original working title of *The Baby of Macon II*? So please take special care in selecting a brace of Anglo-Saxon monosyllables from these randomly-generated combinatorial pairings: *Stargate* • *Timecop* • *Brainscan* • *Freejack* • *Baywatch* • *Pilecream* • *Stakeout* • *Breakfast* • ***Outbreak***

OK

**YOUR STORY.** CineMatic™ ships with a comprehensive set of customizable templates for your quick-start scenarizing convenience. Please select an exhausted genre trope from this scrolling list: • tough NYC cop partnered with [alien | ghost | Arnold | large dog | nauseating kid | T Rex | incontinent vampire | Flipper] • feelgood romantic comedy teaming irresistible all-American halfwit with [same | Einstein | JFK | Mr Motivator | Lemmy] • live-action bluescreen spectacular featuring international comics legend [General Jumbo | Roy of the Rovers | Little Plum | The Crimson Ball] • streetsmart nineties remake of [*Queen Christina* | *Cabin in the Sky* | *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo*] • contemporary suspense drama of small town menaced by

[alien invasion | killer spiders | closure of General Motors plant | 240-channel cable | **tropical virus**]

OK

*Please go and make a slow cup of herb tea*

**YOUR PROTAGONIST.** Please enter the name of the mighty-thewed action star you have expensively signed as a spoiler to Redford & Foster in *Crisis in the Hot Zone*: **Dustin Hoffman**

*I see. Please wait for a considerable time*

Sam Daniels is a little old Jewish guy 20 years too old for the role who likes to act a lot **ReWrite** Dr Sam Daniels is an action hero with a difference: his muscles are those of the mind, the spirit, and the heart. He's been around, and isn't afraid to let it show. A tough, complex character who inspires strong affections and enmities alike, he's a risktaker, a rebel, but also a vulnerable, dogloving ex-husband and humanitarian

*hit PgDn for more of this stuff if required;  
otherwise Enter to proceed*

**YOUR ANTAGONIST.** The 3 keys to a surefire great movie are (i) conflict (ii) conflict and (iii) Drew Barrymore



dropping her **JUST KIDDING** yes it's conflict again. So, think carefully: what force stands between <Dr Sam Daniels> and his mission to <save humanity>? Choose one from: • timescale of actual bacteriological research in the real world • practical implications of trying to contain a highly contagious airborne virus once established in an affluent California town of 2000 vehicle-owning persons • **loony popeyed Donald Sutherland**

*An excellent choice. Please go and lie down for a bit*

**YOUR MORAL CODE.** It's essential your movie should say something inane about good and evil. Remember that movies are in the business of turning real, complex, difficult political issues into narratives of child-like clarity and simplicity, where the only universally-recognized crimes are those against style, the environment, and the family. Here's CineMatic™'s suggested list of sins to be punished in this movie: bioweapons research • chopping down rainforest • shipping live monkeys for experimentation <<Uh-oh! Remember this movie is going to be shown on the very airlines targeted by boycott campaigns>> **ReWrite** abducting live monkeys that have been shipped for legitimate scientific purposes with all the appropriate paperwork scrupulously filed and then hawking them illicitly to dodgy petshops in backwoodsland • wearing black leather & playing extremely poor West Coast rock up loud while driving

• leaving the door of "Biosafety Level 4: Ebola, Lassa, Hanta" wide open to let the Steadicam in <<maybe we should let that last one go>>. Virtues to be rewarded: keeping large dogs • not eating strangers' cookies • and above all, respecting US Constitution & White House chain of command.

*Which brings us to:*

**YOUR THEME.** Just why is the subject of [surfing dinosaurs | zany cannibal cops | **tropical viruses**] so powerfully contemporary and resonant?. Use CineMatic's SubTextualize™ option to find out! • Viruses have become a powerful, transposable metaphor in the popular consciousness: a way of thinking-without-thinking about the spread of contemporary problems like drugs, crime, and immigration, with the tendentious implication that the proper response is one of containment and isolation from the unexposed population while the experts look for a cure (or, failing that, napalm the infected ghetto). • It's as close as you can permissibly get to a feelgood movie about HIV. People need reassurance that viruses can be eliminated as easily as other threats to every American's constitutional right to everlasting life; that's why in this movie the Pentagon has to turn out to have been harbouring the secret of a cure all along, and merely concealing it from the citizenry for its own nefarious undemocratic ends. • It reassures an isolationist public about their ambivalence towards the real



world. Zaire (yes, in the liberated 90s movies can actually name real third-world countries) is a place Americans have to wear spacesuits to visit. It has rainforest (good) full of biodiversity (good) which unfortunately includes stuff like Ebola (not good) and the ancestor of HIV itself (er, allegedly) just waiting to hop the species barrier on the back of some cute little monkey. It also, of course, has 9800% inflation as a result of Western connivance with the Mobutu regime over decades of tyranny and corruption appalling even by central-African standards; but to allow any suggestion that the logging condemned so roundly in the movie is anything but a strictly-local moral issue is an absolute no-no. • It's all really about Vietnam. No, seriously: Sutherland is a 60s survivor of the bad old days when a non-accountable military-industrial complex ran government strategy, disenfranchising the civilian populace in contravention of their Constitutional rights, and turning foreign policy into a conscience-free zone where deranged militaristic hardmen play meaningless wargames with the lives of their own citizens and respond to the primeval fear of the jungle by throwing napalm at it. Reassuringly, the movie reveals that this kind of abuse is a far cry from the way the military works in the democratic 90s, where the service is full of cool rebellious guys like Dr Sam for whom obeying orders is entirely optional, and who work hand

Dustin Hoffman (above right) as Colonel Sam Daniels M.D. with (previous page) Rene Russo as Dr. Roberta "Robby" Keough, and (below) Morgan Freeman as General Billy Forth and Donald Sutherland as General McClintock in *Outbreak*.









# BRIAN STABLEFORD THE ROAD TO HELL



He was shorter than I'd expected. You don't get much indication of height from head-and-shoulders shots, which was all the HV had been broadcasting. The waiting newsmen had snatched all kinds of pictures when his plane landed at Heathrow but the editors only wanted to show him in intimate close-up, unsmiling. Villains always look more sinister displayed that way, even when their hair is silver and they wear old-fashioned eyeglasses. He was still a bogey-man, even after all these years; forgiveness didn't come easy for his kind of crime, even when everyone admitted that it had been a tragic error born of good intentions.

He was standing by the window looking out over Brixton. His cell didn't have a view at all; I guess he was trying hard to be grateful for any glimpse of the homeland he could get.

I offered my hand to him before I sat down at the table, but he didn't take it. He didn't exactly ignore me, but he made it obvious that he intended to keep his distance, literally and figuratively. "My name is Alex Prentice," I told him. "I'm the *amicus curiae*

attached to your case. Do you understand what my function is? I'm afraid there've been some sweeping changes to the criminal justice system since you were last in England."

"I'd still be entitled to a lawyer if I wanted one," he said stonily. "I don't."

"I'm not your lawyer," I told him. "I'm the court's. I'm supposed to make an objective survey of the evidence for presentation to the three judges. If you had a lawyer of your own he'd simply be an advisor – he wouldn't actually be able to plead your case in court. The adversarial system has been dismantled."

"I'm sure you're a cost-efficient substitute for the cumbersome apparatus of prosecution and defence," he said mildly. "You'll find this case very straightforward. I've pleaded guilty to all the charges."

I suppose he knew that I couldn't possibly want it to be straightforward. I was obliged to be neutral, but that didn't mean I wasn't human. Even an *amicus curiae* isn't immune to ambition. This was a high-profile case; there was glory to be gained if I could spring a few surprises. The odds weren't good,





Illustrations by Noel Bateman

but I was certainly going to give it a try – which is to say no more, really, than that I was determined to do my job as thoroughly and efficiently as I could.

"I still have to advise the court as to the matter of sentencing," I pointed out to him.

He laughed, briefly and bitterly. "I'm 72 years old," he said. "I've refused all longevity treatments. Do you honestly suppose it matters a damn whether I'm sentenced to ten years or ten thousand? If it's just a matter of where, that doesn't bother me. I'll presumably be in solitary confinement, if only to protect me from the other inmates. Believe me, Mr Prentice, one cell is pretty much like another. I know."

"I still have to make my report," I told him. "I hope it won't be too much trouble for you to answer a few questions. You did come back of your own free will, after all. If the matter of punishment is irrelevant to you, you must have some interest in setting the record straight and explaining what went wrong back in 2011."

"I didn't come back in order to participate in a show trial, or to start pointing the finger at other

guilty parties. I still consider myself bound by my affirmations and I won't give away any secrets."

*So why the hell are you here? I wondered. Do you, perhaps, expect to serve as a catalyst? Do you think your mere presence will be enough to force others – including me – to root out truths which were allowed to lie buried 35 years ago? I knew it was wishful thinking, but I couldn't help myself.*

"If you want to put me in the dock so that the HV audience can indulge in a long-drawn-out ritual hate session you'll have to do it without my help," he said. "I've nothing to say except that I did what I'm accused of doing. The project I masterminded went horribly, tragically wrong. I'm a mass murderer. That's all there is to it."

"You haven't been charged with murder," I pointed out. "Nobody claims that you caused the deaths deliberately. Manslaughter is the most serious charge on the sheet."

"One way or another, the children died," he countered dully. "I'm here to answer for their deaths."

"You're a little late," I said. "No one wants a show



trial, Dr Fallon, and no one needs any kind of ritual hate session. We only want to know what went wrong, and how, and why. My job is simply to get the fullest explanation possible. I hope you'll help me, but if you won't, I'll do the best I can without your help."

He condescended to turn around then. "You're a young man, Mr Prentice," he observed. "I expect that's why they appointed you to this particular case. You belong to the generation which came after the one on which I unleashed the plague. To you, I'm a legendary figure, just like the one they named me after. You might just as well be here to interview the Pied Piper of Hamelin. People were in no mood for explanations in 2011; they wanted a lynching. I don't blame them – I don't even say that they were wrong. I won't try to tell you that I let myself be smuggled out to the outlaw state which has protected me these last 35 years so that I could continue to use my talents in the service of mankind and try to make amends for what I'd done. I got out purely and simply to save my neck."

"Why come back at all?" I asked bluntly. Verbal ambush is one of the tricks of the trade. "Why not die in harness? If you're so keen to face the music, and don't intend to defend yourself, why not pass your own sentence?"

"Perhaps I was sent back," he suggested, finally condescending to come away from the window and sit down. "Perhaps I had no choice." I was as sure as I could be that his reluctance had been all show – that he'd been away far too long not to relish the prospect of a long conversation with someone like me. I figured that he was only playing games in order to spin the process out. Perhaps he wanted to make my job difficult so that he could get to know me, strike up a proper acquaintance. I considered his answer with due care. Maybe the people who'd kept him under wraps *had* kicked him out, figuring that his usefulness was ended. It was remarkably loyal of him, if so, to remain so stubbornly silent about who they were and where he'd been.

"Have you looked through the files my office decanted into your cell?" I asked him. I was looking right at him but he wouldn't make eye-contact. He had his hands on the table in front of him, fingers interlaced, and he was staring at them as if they were a work of art.

"Yes," he said. "It's all true. I've already told you – I admit everything. I have no defence, and I don't want to enter any plea in mitigation. I am solely responsible for the failure of my plan. I ran away because I was scared for my life and I came back because I'm no longer scared for my life. That's all there is to it."

I was certain that he had more to say, but that he needed to be coaxed, or seduced into letting it out. He'd been incommunicado for 35 years. He *had* to want his say. No matter how hard he protested, he had to be in search of some kind of absolution, some kind of self-justification. He had to want to confess, and I was convinced that I was the man appointed by fate to hear his confession. All it required was patience, and a little judicious encouragement. It

was a test – of my competence, of the strength of my ambition.

"But the plan *didn't* fail, did it?" I said craftily. "It was a great success. It solved the rat problem in a matter of days. The problem was that it succeeded just a little too well."

"No, Mr Prentice," he replied. "It didn't *succeed too well*. The larvae weren't supposed to kill the children. The plan was to kill the rats and *nothing else*. It failed." His voice was colourless, but there was an enormous depth of feeling there, even after all these years. Whether he knew it or not, he wanted me to delve, to pester, to wrinkle out the truth. I thought I knew what the secret had to be, and I thought it was my duty to bring it into the open. I wasn't the kind of man to be afraid of opening up a can of worms – if I might be excused a truly dreadful pun. I looked at him steadily, wondering what route I ought to take to what I thought was the hellish heart of the matter.

"Why hookworms, Dr Fallon?" I said. It seemed like a convenient and dainty way to bait the hook. "I mean, I understand the general thinking behind the plan. You'd been asked to produce something that would kill the rats, and you'd been discouraged from using a virus or a bacterium because there'd been other infective mutations, other escapes. You were commissioned to look for another kind of parasite, something which would be easier to control and direct at one specific target. I understand all that – but why *hookworms*? That, I just don't get."

It was a nice enough question. How could he resist the opportunity to explain? But he was still playing coy, and was not yet ready to be drawn.

Eliot Barrington Fallon, known to the tabloid media as the Pied Piper, looked up momentarily from his rapt contemplation of his hands, met my gaze for the most fleeting of instants, shrugged his shoulders, and simply said: "Why not?"

One of the benefits of being an *amicus curiae* is that you can issue *subpoenas* to just about anyone. Your judgments of relevance can be challenged retrospectively, but the people have to talk to you first. If they choose not to answer, the risk they run of being held in contempt of court is far greater than the risk you run of being censured for overstepping the mark. I knew that was going to come in handy while I was investigating the 35-year-old sins of the so-called Pied Piper; his case was one on which working genetic engineers were notoriously reluctant to comment. Most of the people who'd actually worked with him were dead, and the ones who weren't were obsessively keen to distance themselves from what he'd done. It wasn't easy to find someone willing to put together a sensitive and sympathetic account of his misadventure.

The most helpful witness I found, as things turned out, was Lizabeth Froude. She was only a year younger than Fallon, so she'd been working for the same masters during the same period, but she'd been based in the Scillies, about as far away from Durham as it was possible to be. She'd never met



Fallon, she'd never had any children, and she knew as much as anyone about the delicate business of DNA-manipulation. For my purposes, she was perfect – but she wouldn't have volunteered her services if I hadn't insisted.

"Why did he use hookworms?" I asked her. "It seems to me to be a bizarre way of tackling the problem."

"Not in the context of the times," she said warily. "If you consider the precise parameters of the problem against the background of other lines of research that were fashionable at the time it was a perfectly rational choice. It was approved by the Ministry and the Military, remember. The proposal seemed reasonable enough to them, before it all went horribly awry. Afterwards, everybody started shouting about what a stupid idea it was and how abominably reckless it had been to use something so viciously nasty, but it looked different beforehand. If anyone had told me about the proposal, I wouldn't have thrown up my hands in horror."

"Could you explain it in such a way that a non-scientist who wasn't even born until 2016 can get a grip on it?" I asked, laying on the layman's humility with a trowel. "Start at the very beginning – the beginning as *you* see it."

"Firstly," she said patiently, "you have to understand the awful magnitude of the problem. 'The rats had been threatening a population explosion for 30 years and more. They thrived on our wastes, you see – they were far better adapted to our way of living than we were. At first, it seemed that modern technology was easily capable of winning the war. Anti-coagulants like warfarin kept the problem under control throughout the 1980s, even though the first colonies of resistant rats were well-established. It wasn't until the mid-90s that the smarter, warfarin-resistant strains tipped the balance back in their favour. We were still dumping our wastes then, in vast quantities – an open invitation which the rats greedily accepted. A new generation of poisons cut them back for a while but they became ever more adept at developing resistance. The speed of their adaptation was frightening in itself. 1999 was a very bad year, but there was a marginal improvement thereafter, a lull before the *real* storm of summer 2005. You can get all this stuff from the history books, you know. Do I really have to lead you every step of the way?'"

"I'm sorry," I said. "It really will be a help. Please keep going, as fully as you can."

"By '05, of course, the first escapes had taken place. Bacteria which shouldn't have been able to survive outside the lab because they were attenuated strains threw up mutants which *could* survive, and they exported all kinds of other stuff for which they'd been used as cookers: plasmids, virus-cores, entire retroviruses. The number of people affected was very small, and there had only been a handful of deaths, but such was the climate of opinion that it was blown up out of all proportion, construed as an awful warning. The tabloids and TV people had been waiting to pounce for years, and they went out of their way to represent every leak as a catastrophe

trembling on the brink of apocalypse. The problem could have been contained by using more carefully attenuated bacteria and better sterile technique, but public hysteria wouldn't accept that. Genetic engineering was brought under such tight regulation that the only sponsor of cutting-edge research left in the field was the Ministry of Defence, which had the duty of preparing for the first plague war – except, of course, that we already had an enemy on our doorstep in the shape of a plague of rats. The men from the Ministry weren't exactly depressed about that, you know. Some of them saw it as an opportunity to test the whole theory of plague warfare against an enemy who needn't be shown any quarter."

That was exactly what I wanted to hear about, but the time wasn't ripe for grasping the nettle. I just nodded, to tell her to keep going under her own steam.

"The Military had always been sceptical about biological weaponry, of course," she continued. "The old guard had grown up with all kinds of fancy hardware, and they had difficult adapting their image of what war was and how it ought to be fought to the possibilities of biotechnology. There was no *conflict*, you understand, but the Ministry and the generals had differing points of view. When we were asked to tackle the rat problem, as a way of testing our mettle, we knew well enough that there were people looking for us to take a fall, and who wouldn't be at all displeased to see a cock-up – a *moderate* cock-up, that is; nobody took the least pleasure from what actually happened. *Nobody*."

"I understand that," I said. She was drifting away from the true path again, but she still had to get to the hookworms. There'd be time to bring up dark-edged conspiracy theories later.

"The rats really were, in themselves, a *plague*, in the strict sense in which biologists had long used the term. Calling them a plague, however, recalled other connections. The media made sure everybody knew that in the past, plagues of rats had been the forerunners of epidemics of *the* plague: bubonic plague. It wasn't enough for the TV people to go on and on about rats in people's houses and rats devastating the fields of Europe; they had to keep on reminding people of what had happened in the 14th century, and again in the 17th, when the dieback following the explosion of rat populations released hordes of desperate fleas which carried the plague to human beings. The media never seemed to tire of telling people that the germs and the fleas were still around, and that only the calculus of probability had kept the plague at bay for three centuries. They tended to skate over the fact that we now had *treatments* for the plague, that it wasn't the unstoppable killer it had been before. Scare-stories pulled in viewers for the advertisers, and that was the bottom line. That was the background against which people like Eliot Fallon and myself were set to work."

"Surely that should have made Dr Fallon doubly careful? If he was as sensitive as everyone else to the idea of parasites transferring themselves from rats to people, how on earth did he let it happen?"



"He didn't *let it happen!*" she retorted. "It just *happened*. The point I'm making is that there was a climate of fear militating against the possibility of using agents too small to be clearly seen. You asked me *why hookworms*? Well, I'm telling you why we couldn't even *think* about using fleas. The real question you want me to answer, I think – although you don't know enough to phrase it that way – is *why hookworms and not tapeworms*?"

"Tapeworms? Why should he have used tapeworms?" I *had* done my background reading. I just wanted to make sure that I'd got it all strung together right. It needed to be put on the record by somebody qualified to build the case and state it clearly. She was doing fine on that account.

"Because they didn't have our techniques of somatic engineering back then. The bioscientists were only beginning to make progress in metabolic retuning, and nobody knew that within a decade metabolic retuning would have crowded out every other method of weight-reduction. You do know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

"Slimming," I said. "Fighting the flab. Another war that's since been won."

"Right. Absurd as it might seem to you, weight-control was an industry in those days, and a fiercely competitive one. In spite of all the hysteria whipped up against genetic engineers, there were several teams working with tapeworms, trying to capture and control a neat little trick of which the humble tapeworm was a past master. A tapeworm lives inside the long intestine of an animal, secured by a spiny head wedged into the gut wall like a grappling-iron. It lives on the food its host eats, but it has to avoid being digested itself. It does this partly by armour-plating itself with a waxy tegument, but walls work both ways and it has to take food in as well as keeping alien digestive juices at bay, so it also secretes suppressors which inhibit the host's digestive processes. That's why people infected with tapeworms become emaciated – it's not so much the food that the tapeworm steals as the fact that the host can no longer digest what the tapeworm doesn't need.

"It wasn't unknown for fashionable ladies in the 18th and 19th centuries to infect themselves deliberately with various kinds of gut parasites, in the interests of being able to consume huge amounts of food and liquor without becoming obese – a cunning strategy, but all too easily overdone. Insane as it seems, back in '05 the genetic engineers who were being impeded every step of the way in the quest to vanquish disease and conquer cancer could still obtain funding to study tapeworms with a view to finding a safe and easily-controllable method of weight-control. Some of them, inevitably, wanted to use actual tapeworms rather than merely stealing their genes; others – equally inevitably, all things considered – were wondering whether tapeworms could be engineered to perform other neat tricks, like delivering medicines or manufacturing vitamins. Given that research into the use of virus vectors was in such bad odour, it's hardly surprising that the idea of manufacturing ultra-benign tapeworms was being

mooted as a possible way of filling the gap."

"Okay," I said. "I see that. So why *not* tapeworms? Why did Fallon decide to use hookworms instead?"

"Because even the most vicious tapeworms are *slow*. To attack the rats he needed, above all else, to find something *quick*. Fifty years of intensive selective pressure had bred fast-adapting super-rats. Fallon didn't want to give them any time to react to the next weapon deployed against them. He wanted something very nasty... something which would do what warfarin had done 30-odd years earlier, but in such a way that there was no possibility of the rats fighting back. Hookworms secrete the same kind of anti-digestive agents that tapeworms use, but they don't live on the food sloshing around in their host's gut. They clamp themselves over the folds in the gut wall through which food is digested, diverting a stream of blood to flow through their bodies. In essence, they're vampires. In the wild, of course, they're prudent vampires – they exercise a modicum of self-control, so as not to use up their hosts too quickly. Normally, you don't get plagues of hookworms – but Eliot Fallon came up with the idea that it might be easy enough to launch a plague of hookworms against the plague of rats, with an effect sufficiently devastating to wipe them out in a matter of weeks.

"He was right, of course, about how easy it would be to cancel out the hookworm's inbuilt prudence by short-circuiting its cumbersome breeding-cycle. But the other problem, waiting in the wings all the while, was how to make sure that the hookworms did exactly what they were supposed to do, and nothing more. He had to figure out a way of making certain that they couldn't attack people once the rats were dead, the way the fleas of old had done. He evidently thought he had done it, although I have no idea what kind of tests he carried out, but he hadn't. The stray larvae weren't tough enough to cause severe problems to adults, but small children could be killed almost as quickly as big rats, and a lot of them died before treatment could be administered. The tabloids and the TV were avid for any new Frankenstein story, of course, and this was the Frankenstein story to end them all. Their headlines were ready-made. It wouldn't have mattered much even if the victims *hadn't* almost all been children. They'd still have called him the Pied Piper.

"When I was young, Mr Prentice, we used to have a saying: *Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me*. We didn't understand how much the world had changed. We didn't know that 2,000 years after Christ, it's names and not nails that are used to crucify people."

It was a neat last line, but I didn't want it to end there. It was my turn now. "Dr Froude," I said carefully. "Is there, in your opinion, any chance that it might not have been an accident? You've already said that some of your political and military masters regarded the war against the rats as a trial run for a *real* plague war. Is it conceivable, do you think, that someone – with or without Dr Fallon's collaboration – contrived the crossover that killed all those children?"

She looked at me as if I were a scorpion that had



just crawled out of one of her carpet slippers. It must have been quite an effort for her to refrain from saying what she thought.

"I believe that one or two of the nastiest tabloids reported rumours to that effect," she said, very carefully indeed. "To the best of my knowledge, the rumours were utterly unfounded – the product of diseased minds. No genetic engineer would ever be party to such a scheme. We have our own sense of duty, and we are extremely rigorous in its pursuit."

*I'll bet you are, I thought.*

"I understand about the hookworms now," I told the Pied Piper. "I see that it made sense."

He was sitting at the table meekly enough, but he hadn't yet made eye-contact. "Well done," he said, with only the faintest trace of irony.

"I *think* I can follow the intellectual route by which you arrived at the idea," I went on. If a witness won't take a baited hook, you have to try to lead them. Flattery, they say, will get you anywhere; I was about to put the saying to the test. "I've been reading all your papers," I went on. "The early ones are especially fascinating – the ones about the logic of natural selection."

"Armchair stuff," he said off-handedly. "An active mind in combination with idle hands is capable of many clever follies."

"It was all new to me," I persisted. "I never heard of Mertensian mimicry until I read your paper on it. Fascinating notion."

"Congratulate Mertens, not me."

"Can I just check that I've got it straight? There's a whole series of snake species, ranging from the deadly through the not-so-deadly to the utterly harmless, which all have similar markings. At first, it was assumed that the deadly ones were the models and all the others mimics, but Mertens pointed out that that didn't make sense, because predators which encountered the deadly ones didn't have any opportunity to learn avoidance. He argued that the deadly ones were mimics, just like the harmless ones, and that the not-so-deadly ones had to be the models because they were the ones which could intimidate predators without actually killing them, giving the said predators the opportunity to learn to avoid that particular pattern of protective coloration. Is that right?"

"Yes," he said, staring at his hands as if he couldn't quite figure out how the fingers came to be interlaced that way.

"It's a neat idea – the deadly mimicking the not-so-deadly, the imprudent mimicking the prudent. I think I see how it led on to the papers on the life-cycles of parasites. It seems like a puzzling thing, at first glance, that something like the malarial parasite should have such a weirdly complicated life-cycle: mosquito to man and back again. How could such a clumsily chancy thing evolve by natural selection? Why hasn't the parasite been refined by natural selection so as to cut out the mosquito, completing its life-cycle within the human host? Because if it did, it'd be *too* deadly, wouldn't it? The





parasite which survives and thrives in the long term is the one which can't do too much damage to its hosts. Parasites cut out for long evolutionary careers need built-in prudence. The force of natural selection actually incorporates handicaps, so that parasites can remain quietly endemic without ever becoming a plague, and one of the time-tested methods of handicapping is the use of alternate hosts. The nastier the parasite, the more convoluted its life-cycle has to be."

"It's a wonderful world, Mr Prentice," he said, with what sounded suspiciously like a sigh. He was studying the ceiling now, but he was listening. He was following my every move along the fatal line of reasoning which had tempted him, and caused his spectacular fall from grace.

"Hookworms are nasty too," I said. "Tapeworms are mild by comparison, but even they need alternate hosts. Hookworms are real bastards. What an odyssey they have to undertake! The larvae climb grass-stalks so that they can transfer to the skin of passers-by, then it's through the sweat-glands and hair-follicles, into the blood or the lymph-vessels, all the way to the lungs – then up the bronchii to the mouth and down the oesophagus, so that they can get back to the small intestine. Very cumbersome... and very necessary, because a more efficient cycle would wreak havoc among the host population. I can see how the ideas came together – how you got caught up with the notion of making a deadly mimic out of the clumsy model. I can see why it appealed to you so much, and why it was so simple in genetic engineering terms. All you had to do was blot out the handicapping genes, so that the hookworms could produce eggs which mostly hatched inside the primary host, producing a hookworm population explosion in the gut. It wasn't to the long-term advantage of the worms, of course, even though the population explosion also flooded the rats' faeces with more eggs and larvae. As the rat population dropped sharply, so did the probability of rats picking up the excreted larvae. From epidemic to low-level endemic in one fell swoop. Magic. The real Pied Piper would have been proud of you."

"The one you're thinking of wasn't real," Fallon pointed out. "He's a character in a story."

"I thought it was a poem by Browning," I said, happy enough to trade corrections.

"Before the poem there was a story," he said, "and before the story a legend. The legend probably had some truth in it, referring to the exploits of a real 14th-century ratcatcher whose campaign against the rats was effective enough to release the plague on the human inhabitants of the town where he worked. The plague would have killed the children first, of course. It's even conceivable that the flea-bites might have made them so restless before the plague-symptoms developed that they seemed to be dancing to inaudible music."

"You knew that all along, didn't you?" I said quietly. "It was lurking at the back of your mind, with the notion of Mertensian mimicry and all the rest. Hookworm infestation causes itching too, doesn't it? Itching and fever. You had the Pied Piper legend in

mind from the very beginning."

I won the round. He looked at me. He looked deep into my placid eyes.

"What if I did?" he said. He knew *what if*. He had to know. He just wanted me to voice it.

"Is it possible," I said, "that what happened *wasn't a mistake*? Is it possible that it was just the intellectual climate of the day which made people see it as another horrible foul-up, another case of scientists trying to play God and letting loose the Devil? Did you – or someone working with you – *know* that the larvae would be capable of infecting humans as well as rats? Did someone kill those children on purpose, Dr Fallon?"

"Am I to be charged with that?" he said, in a tone so level as to be almost macabre. "There was some slanderous gossip at the time, I know – talk of new weapons of biological warfare – but it was just vilely malicious speculation. No such accusation is formally made in those files you kindly sent me."

"No such accusation is made in the files," I conceded silkily, "but when I spoke to you last, you accused yourself of mass murder. I pointed out to you, if you recall, that you'd only been charged with manslaughter, but you seemed oddly reluctant to accept the correction. Did you mean it literally, Dr Fallon? *Was* it murder? Did you and your military masters really *intend* to kill people as well as rats?"

"Why would I do that?" he inquired, his voice as mild as milk. He was still looking at me, still confronting all that I stood for. "Even if my military masters had wanted me to, why on earth would I have gone along with them, knowing what the consequences would be?"

"Maybe you thought the human population explosion was getting out of hand," I said. "Maybe you thought the plague of people needed to be dealt with as urgently as the plague of rats. Maybe you believed, along with certain sections of the Military, that the capabilities of plague warfare had to be *displayed*, in accordance with the logic of deterrence."

"You have a nasty mind, Mr Prentice," he informed me, before he turned away.

"I have a neutral mind," I retorted. "My duty is to consider *all* the possibilities, including the possibility that you might be innocent in spite of your admission of guilt, and the possibility that you might be guilty of worse crimes than those with which you have so far been charged."

"The parents still want my blood, don't they?" he said wryly. "I suppose you figure that you might as well hang me for a sheep as a lamb. But I'm too old, and too tired, to be hurt by anything you say or anything you do. If you want to charge me with murder, Mr Prentice, do so. I can't and won't complain."

"I can only make it murder if I convince myself that it *was* murder, Dr Fallon," I told him, mimicking his mildness with Mertensian guile.

"I don't believe that *your* masters would let you do it even if you did," he replied, with an accuracy which told me that I was getting through at last. "If I went down for pre-meditated murder, I couldn't go down alone."



Fallon was right, of course. If he testified that the parasites' crossover from rats to humans hadn't been accidental, he'd have been pointing a finger at the people who'd funded and monitored his work. Officially, they'd washed their hands of him 30 years before, appointing him sole scapegoat; unofficially, they'd almost certainly connived at his escape, and might well have continued to fund his research in some far-flung corner of what had once been the British Empire.

I knew how unlikely it was that I'd get anything self-incriminating out of the civil servants or the generals, but I still had to take testimony from those who were still alive, so there was no harm in trying. Brigadier-General Sir Allen Waterfield (retired) seemed to be my best bet; he was far from senile but he'd acquired a reputation for tactlessness in the course of trying to defending his particular rural backyard against the continuing urbanization of the land around the high-speed railway linking London to the Channel Tunnel. Garden-of-England-ism wasn't exactly a true-green political movement, but he certainly wasn't as solidly steel-grey as he had been when he was in Military Intelligence. I was pleased when he received me out of doors, in his own sweet-smelling garden, where the hum of busy insects provided an altogether appropriate background to our conversation.

"I've never shirked my share of the responsibility for what happened," he told me. "I was OIC of the military end of the operation and I had to carry the can. Matter of duty. Simple fact is, though, that I was just a bystander. Scientist produces a plan like that, rubber-stamped by the Scientific Civil Service, you have to trust his judgment. Man like Fallon says the bloody worms can't possibly infect human beings, you're inclined to believe him. Said he'd exposed himself to infection, you know, before he asked for volunteers – probably had, silly bugger. We did call for volunteers, and sure enough, the worms couldn't get a grip on 'em. Didn't try it on kids, though – how could we?"

"Even if the original worms were incapable of affecting children," I pointed out, "the disaster might still have happened. Genetically-engineered organisms do tend to be unstable – even complex metazoans."

"Didn't know that at the time," he said firmly.

"No, of course not. Were there any other projects involving hookworms under way at the time?"

"What do you mean, *projects*?"

He knew exactly what I meant. I was asking whether anyone was interested in using hookworms for any purpose other than solving the rat problem.

"I mean that if Fallon produced the idea out of nowhere it must have seemed a trifle bizarre. I wondered if there was other research going on."

"Does Fallon say there was?"

"No, he doesn't. To tell you the truth, General, he doesn't say very much about anything. He seems to feel that he's still bound by all the oaths of secrecy he took."

"He is. So am I. What are you getting at, Mr Prentice?"

"I wondered whether you might in be a better position than he is to judge what might now be safely revealed," I said tactfully. "If there's information which might help us to understand the background to Fallon's mistake which he feels duty-bound to conceal, it's conceivable that someone possessed of higher authority might feel free to release it on his behalf."

"I'm retired," Sir Allen pointed out. "I don't have any authority at all now. Have to talk to my successors. Their decision. Tell you this much, though – the only man working with hookworms was Fallon. Tapeworms were fashionable, lots of people were taking an interest in various other nematodes, but hookworms were Fallon's thing. Any other projects apart from the rat problem were his – and I mean *his*. Nobody ordered him to work with hookworms, nobody told him what he ought to do with them. Does that answer your question?"

*Nearly, I thought, but not quite nearly enough.*

"Do you have any idea why Fallon has come back?" I asked him.

"How could I?" he countered. "Haven't seen or spoken to the man in 35 years."

"But you saw and spoke to him frequently when the crisis was blowing up and getting out of hand. You can judge his state of mind *then* better than anyone else who's still alive, perhaps better than the man himself."

"You're asking me why he ran rather than why he came back?"

*No I'm not, I thought. "If you'd rather look at it from that angle," I said graciously.*

"Don't know. Man wasn't a coward, I know that. Didn't panic – probably never have got away if he had. He was cool. Not dispassionate, mind – he understood the magnitude of the tragedy, and the horror of what he'd unleashed – but he was methodical to the end, working to stop the thing in its tracks. Didn't duck out till they actually went to arrest him. Had it planned, but left it till the last possible moment. Typical of the man."

"Did he have help?" I was quick to ask.

"Who from?" he snapped back. The over-sensitivity was suspicious, but it wasn't evidence.

"Sympathetic colleagues – maybe bioscientists who thought, *there but for the grace of God go I*?"

"Maybe."

"Perhaps he always intended to face up to his responsibilities, just as you did," I suggested. "Perhaps he thought it a matter of duty too. Perhaps some higher duty intervened to take him away, and has only now released him. Was he that kind of man, in your estimation? *Is he that kind of man?*"

"Maybe," he repeated, obstinately.

"How long were specimens of Fallon's hookworms kept in store once the epidemic was over?" I asked, switching tack abruptly.

"As long as I was on active service," he told me equably. "Probably still locked away. Have to keep the buggers, just in case they still exist *out there*. Might have to fight the war all over again. Who can tell?"

"So they're still the subject of active research?"



"Didn't say that. Still around, that's all."

"With some potential utility as a weapon of war."

"Can't say. Haven't had any plague wars yet, thank God. Till we do, no way of knowing what kind of weapons might be deployed and what kind of defences we'd have to muster."

He'd been ready for the question. He'd expected it. What did that imply? Did it matter what it implied, given that it didn't *prove* anything?

"Do you know what Mertensian mimicry is, General?" I asked him. "Did Fallon ever explain it to you?"

He hadn't expected that one. His eyes narrowed as he tried to reason out my motives for asking.

"I think I heard him use the term," he admitted cautiously. "I forget what it means."

"It refers to a situation where something very nasty masquerades as something rather less nasty," I told him blandly, "the true measure of its venomousness unappreciated because those who encounter it are conditioned to see and respond to the moderate nastiness whose guise it wears."

"Too complicated for me, son," he said. "I'm just a soldier."

"All kinds of people wear uniforms," I pointed out. "At the end of the day, all battle-dress is a kind of protective coloration."

"Has anyone accused me of using Dr Fallon to disguise a weapons-test as an unfortunate accident?" he asked bluntly, at last justifying his reputation for impetuousness.

"No," I said. "None of the witnesses I've spoken to have made any such claim about you or Dr Fallon. Is it conceivable, do you think, that anyone could have persuaded a man like Eliot Fallon to go along with something like that?"

"No," he said, "it's not."

"Is it conceivable that someone – without his or your knowledge – could have sabotaged his project?"

"Maybe – but if someone did, it wasn't for the purpose you just hinted at. If anyone sabotaged that project it can only have been green zealots out to poison the reputation of genetic engineering. It definitely wasn't the Military, nor the government of the day."

At least I had his firm and specific denial on record; that was better than a string of maybes. I didn't suppose I'd get any more, and I certainly didn't expect any more – but I wasn't the only one able to spring a surprise or two. As we shook hands before I got into my car, he produced a bolt from the blue.

"It might be worth remembering," he said, with carefully calculated negligence, "what the lame child saw – the one who couldn't follow where the Pied Piper led. That might help you get off the dead-end road your thoughts are presently following."

It took me quite a while to work out what he meant, and why he'd taken the trouble to throw me the scrap, but I did it – and I began to think that perhaps the concept of *Military Intelligence* wasn't an oxymoron after all.

"The road to hell," I quoted at Eliot Barrington Fallon, "is paved with good intentions."

"So they say," he said. He was able to look me in the

face, now. He'd settled into his new routines. He was as nearly at ease with himself as he ever would be.

"I think I understand what happened," I told him. "I also think I understand why you can't and won't admit it. I think I know why you let the Military spirit you away instead of facing up to things back in 2011, and why you felt that you had still to come back and face the music in the end."

"That's very clever of you," he said tolerantly.

"I really thought it might have been planned the way it happened," I confessed. "I suppose I wanted it to be that way, so there'd be something spectacular for me to find out and show to the world. I apologize for that."

"There's no need," he said. "A lot of people out there would be only too happy to find out that I killed their children deliberately. That would fit in with their scheme of things. It would make me out to be *evil*. They can deal with evil, you see. It's something that merely has to be stamped out, with no holds barred. Incompetence is rather more ambiguous; it leaves them uncertain, not sure how much revenge they're entitled to exact. It left me uncertain too – I didn't know how much revenge they were entitled to exact either. The last 35 years haven't been easy."

"More people are on your side than you might imagine," I told him, elliptically.

"I'm not one of them," he answered bleakly. I'd realized that, of course.

"Neither am I," I said. "I'm strictly neutral, and my duty is to assess, carefully and conscientiously, all the evidence placed before me, plus any further evidence that I can discover by assiduous search. I've done that, to the best of my ability. According to the evidence, you caused a genetically-engineered organism to be released into the environment on a massive scale, in order to kill the rats which were over-running the country. The measures which you took in order to ensure that the organisms were incapable of infecting human beings were inadequate, and in spite of the availability of effective treatments, many of the human beings who were infected – almost all of them children – died. You've pleaded guilty to the various charges arising from that sequence of events, the most serious of which is manslaughter."

"That's exactly where we started from," he pointed out.

"Sometimes," I said, "it takes a lot of work to establish that the obvious is, in fact, obvious. That's the nature of evidence. Suspicion is a different matter altogether. Officially, of course, I'm not allowed to elaborate patterns of suspicion – but I'm only human. So is Brigadier-General Sir Allen Waterfield, whose evidence served only to confirm the obvious. May I remind you of a story, Dr Fallon?"

"Is it relevant to our business?"

"Not to our business, no. That's concluded."

"In that case, you may."

"When the Pied Piper of Hamelin led the children away into the land beyond the mountain, one lame boy couldn't keep up. He was still outside when the magic doorway closed again – but he saw into the



land beyond it. It was a beautiful place, like the mythical land of Cockayne or the Fortunate Isles, or... well, you probably know lots of other names. The faithless parents of Hamelin, who'd refused the piper his due, knew only that they'd lost their children – but the lame boy knew that he'd led them to a better place."

"But that's not what the *real* ratcatcher did," Eliot Fallon pointed out. "The man who spawned the legend, if there was one, delivered the children up to agonizing death, and the adults too."

"Not by design. The ratcatchers of 2011, of course, were the genetic engineers. They too were faced with faithless paymasters, who forced them to work on projects they'd rather not have been involved with, and projects they couldn't consider worthy – but they did their best within the restrictions, and took what opportunities they could. If it was permissible, and fashionable, to work on tapeworms, they were content to do it, and to do their level best to design *benign* tapeworms: symbionts rather than parasites. Tapeworms to control weight... and to deliver other rewards. Tapeworms whose infestations would actually improve and empower their hosts."

"I believe some people were working on projects like that," Fallon said.

"And others were working on hookworms," I said. "One other, anyway. Hookworms that could kill rats and... well, and do other things, I guess. A sword that was capable of beating itself into a ploughshare. Exceedingly prudent hookworms, which would not only alternate between different hosts but would treat those hosts very differently. A wild idea, perhaps, but not a crazy one. After all, malarial parasites get along pretty well with mosquitos, don't they? To a man who understood the niceties of Mertensian mimicry and the life-cycles of prudent parasites, it probably wouldn't seem crazy at all. But the plan went wrong. Maybe it was over-complicated, maybe it was badly thought-out; hindsight certainly assures us that it was too ambitious."

"That's all pure fantasy," Fallon said equably.

"Yes, I know. It would be an even purer fantasy, wouldn't it, to imagine that the *prudent* worms are still out there, being prudent, while their recklessly deadly kin have long since eliminated themselves from the scene. I mean, if anyone even *suspected* that, there'd be another tabloid storm, wouldn't there? Not the sort of thing any responsible adult would encourage or condone. The professional scaremongers would probably start wondering whether there might be labs somewhere in the distant corners of the globe where a whole flock of new hookworm species were being brought to maturity. God alone knows where all the speculation would end."

"It shouldn't even start," Fallon said, staring at me. His eyes suddenly seemed to be filled with an intense and curiously steady light. "There's no need. The simple facts of the case are that a man made a new kind of hookworm to make war on a plague of





rats. He made a mistake, and the worms that killed the rats went on to kill thousands of children. It was his fault, and his alone, and he ought to answer for the consequences of his mistake. That's all there is to it."

"I know," I said. "That's exactly what the evidence says."

That was the end of the matter, so far as I was concerned. Involvement with such a high-profile case certainly didn't do my career any harm, but it didn't give it the kind of meteoric boost I'd dared to hope for when I took it on. I had to find another route to the glorious heavens where the high-flyers soar.

They *do* say that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Sometimes, I wonder if any of them are mine. I suppose we all do – all those of us, at least, whose work involves us in important matters of right and wrong, good and evil, innocence and guilt.

**Brian Stableford** recently gained his first-ever shortlisting for the Hugo Award (for his novella "Les Fleurs to Mal," Asimov's); the result will be announced at the World SF Convention in Glasgow in late August. His most recent novel is *Serpent's Blood* (Legend, £15.99), the opening volume of a new trilogy.

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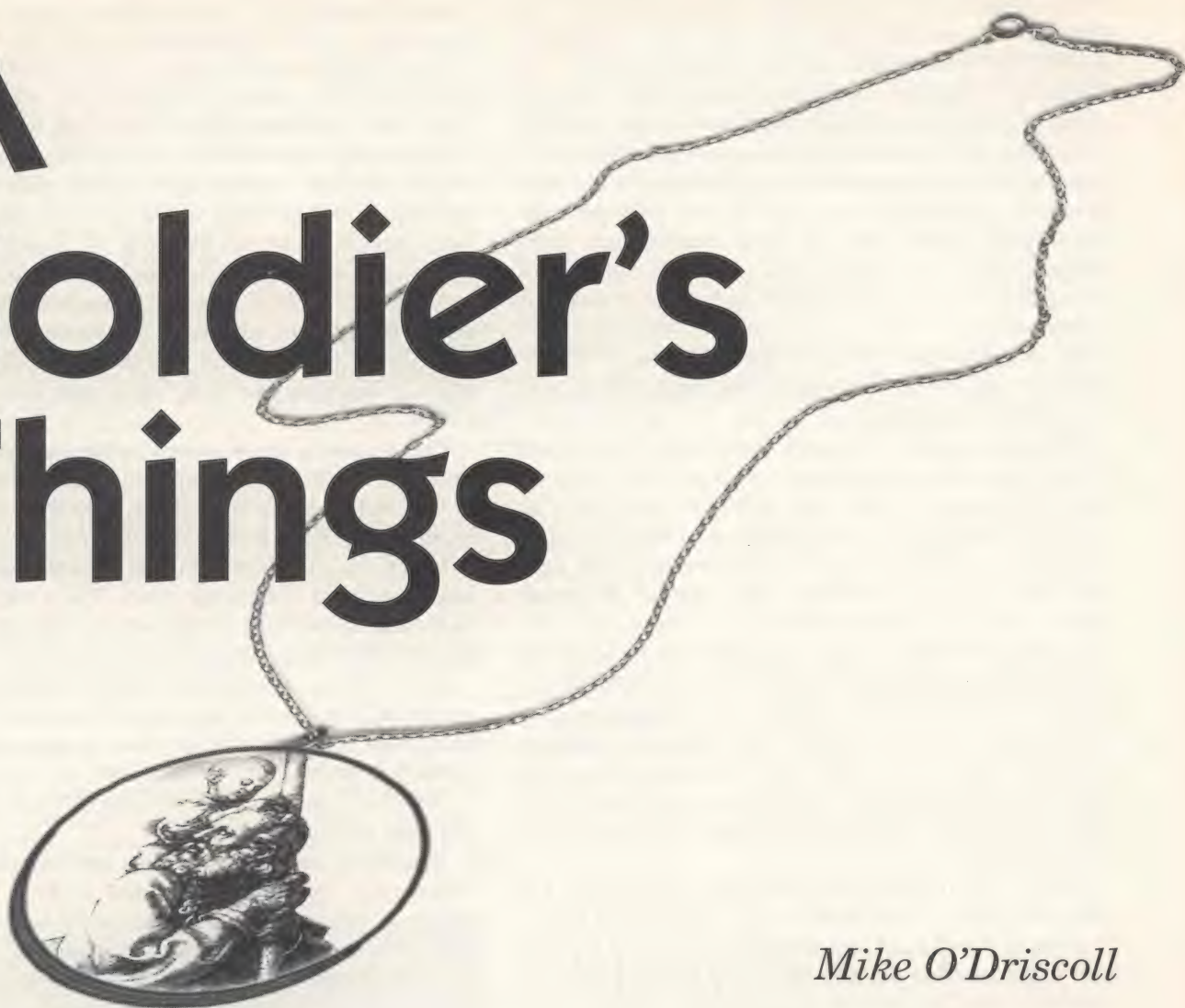
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# A Soldier's Things



*Mike O'Driscoll*

**F**ate is another word for magic. It has the capacity to frighten people, make them unwilling to participate. Sometimes, they wish for things they don't really want and all that enchantment is wasted. Others, like Joe, even when they run they have no choice, no matter what they wish. I seek them out and return them to the fold. Call me Ruskin.

I had been on Joe's trail for over seven years, tracking him all across the continent, witnessing the chaos his desertion had loosed upon the world. I found him in a bar in Harare, seated at a table surrounded by a crowd of avid listeners who kept a steady stream of booze flowing in his direction. His white shirt was stained with sweat and beer, dagger and serpent tattoos slid over his lower arms, and his grey chinos had accumulated a decade's worth of dirt. His artificial leg stuck out rigidly beneath the table, and an orange glow from a lamp fell across his lined and leathered face. His audience were mostly white tourists, come to hear the storytelling bum whose tall tales of war were guaranteed to send you away smiling at the gullibility of other, less cynical, men.

I circled the fringe of the crowd, watching as he came to the end of another tale then drained the

dregs of another glass. He lit a cigarette and let his gaze wander over the faces of those who had come to feed on his pain. His slitted eyes met mine and just for an instant I saw a hint of fear behind the wrinkles, lurking there in the livid blue. Then the crowd were screaming for another tale and Joe was laughing, milking the applause, waiting for another drink to be placed within his reach. I found a chair and placed it among the people to his left. I put my case on the ground and signalled for the young barman to bring me a scotch. Joe wiped sweat from his forehead with his sleeve, sipped a beer and cleared his throat. He glanced once more in my direction, and then began.

## **1. The Scent of Solitary Dreams**

Many years ago, three soldiers got lost on the wrong side of the Coco river with no easy way to get back home. They were part of a unit designated as military advisers to the Contras. The mission was to cross into Nicaragua and wipe out an arms dump in a Sandanista-controlled village. Someone in Intelligence had messed up though, and the unit was ambushed about 50 clicks into the jungle. Prewitt,



Nately and Spigweed were the only survivors, and Nately was carrying a slug in his right shoulder. They escaped the fire-fight and staggered on through the tangled jungle till night fell. Spigweed sat the first watch while his two comrades slept.

Insects chittered and large centipedes scuttled across his legs. He stank of fear and defeat, and the bitterness on his tongue was no more than the after-taste of a glory that never was. Broiling in his own sweat, he mumbled a prayer to a God he'd long ago abandoned. When the old man hopped out from behind a tree and said, "Who's there?" Spigweed's terror flared up for an instant, before he brought it under control.

He levelled his rifle at the old man. "Three marines, my friend," he said. "Tired and broken and much too far from home."

"Well, my worthy," the old man said. "I see your friends dreaming over there, and I see that they do not ask so much. Take these gifts and use them as you will." He placed a small beatbox, a blue cowl and a kilo bag of uncut cocaine on the ground. "The first has the power to enchant, the second to grant wishes, and the third is endless."

Spigweed looked at him, realizing that he spoke in some ancient language he had never heard before. As he tried to figure out how he had understood the words, the old man stepped back into the dripping undergrowth and vanished from his sight. Spigweed stared at the gifts for a long time, convinced that, like his friends, he was dreaming. Perhaps for a while, he slept.

But in the morning the gifts were still there. He woke the others and together they examined them. Spigweed sliced open the top of the bag and sniffed the white powder, feeling the rush hit him like an express train. He invited his comrades to join him, and when Prewitt felt the blood boiling in his veins, he switched on the beatbox. A driving rhythm pounded out of the speakers, and it was soon overlaid with what seemed an ancient yet familiar voice that carried a haunting melody. They understood no words and yet were entranced. A profound stillness settled on the jungle as birds and insects fell silent, enchanted by the music. Hours, maybe even days, passed as if in a few fleeting moments, during which time all memories of war were erased. As the sun climbed or fell – they knew not which – Nately pressed the cowl against his wound. In his heart he wished that he was healed, and that he could be with his comrades in a new home, here amidst the quiet and peace.

And so it was: before their eyes a beautiful white-timbered bungalow with an open verandah sprang up out of the jungle. The trees fell back from its walls, yielding to their dreams.

Spigweed, head reeling but filled now with true belief, lifted Nately in his arms and carried him inside. "Jesus," he said. "He wasn't lying." And there in the cool rooms he told Nately and Prewitt about the old man and what he had said about the three gifts.

And perhaps things would have remained happy in the bungalow, had not the music drawn the natives of

Azul to their home. They woke one morning to find the bungalow surrounded by one hundred or more mahogany-skinned, near-naked tribesmen. Spigweed and the others stepped out onto the verandah.

A tall Indian at the head of the tribe bowed low and said, "You called to us with the old songs. We have come to acknowledge you as our brothers."

Spigweed guessed this was their chief. He surveyed the faces arrayed behind him, and noticed the beautiful young woman standing at his shoulder, her head raised in proud defiance. "I appreciate that," Spigweed said. "Why don't you sit and eat with us."

At this, the chief raised his arms and his people sat on the ground, all except the woman. "My daughter," the chief said. "She was our guide to your kingdom; it was she who first heard and recognized the old songs."

The woman's gaze pierced Spigweed's flesh and found his soul. He felt suddenly powerless, in thrall to her will. In the meantime, Nately wished up a banquet fit for kings and everyone ate their fill. Afterwards, the chief's daughter performed a dance not seen for a thousand years. The truth was, she had communed with jungle spirits and gained powers and knowledge long lost to her people.

Later, when Spigweed's brain burned with the power of the dream, she drew him away from the bungalow and asked him what he most desired. "I think you know that," he told her.

"Yes, but what do I get in return?" she asked him, her eyes searing his mind.

Spigweed kissed her fiercely on the lips and said, "Whatever you want." So, she fucked him there beside a stream, and afterwards he told her of the gifts. At the time, he thought it a fair exchange.

The bungalow was a weathered shack, crumbling in the fetid heat, when Spigweed returned. The gangrene stench from Nately's wound was sweet and sickening, and he mumbled incoherently to himself. Prewitt climbed the trees and like a madman, he beseeched the cacophonous birds to make the song return. Their gifts were stolen and the world they had dreamed was fading like the jungle mist.

Slowly, not even realizing the truth, each of them began to die in many secret ways.

Till, one evening, just as the heavy stormclouds finished pissing on their forlorn heads, the old man walked into the clearing. "I see things haven't gone as well as you expected," he said to Spigweed.

"We didn't ask for much," Spigweed said, exhausted.

"But you lay with the woman," the old man said.

"Was that wrong?"

"Oldest trick in the book. Still, all is not lost. Go to Azul and there you will find her powdering her nose, a habit to which she has become too accustomed."

Despite his disgust, Spigweed asked how to get there. "Follow the song."

When the old man had gone, Spigweed consulted with Prewitt. Together, they carried Nately into the jungle and then strangled him to death. It was, they told themselves, the only humane thing to do. They left his body to be eaten by the wild and nameless



beasts that lurked in the shadows beyond the edge of their perception. Then, together, they set off to find the land of Azul. They wandered through treacherous swamps and climbed ogreish mountains, catching on the air the distant notes of an ancient song. After many days, they came down out of the mountains into a clear, green valley where no wild beasts thrived. This was Azul. Wary at first, but growing bolder, they walked into the village and saw the magic spell that had been woven over the land. The once-proud warriors crawled on their bellies in the dusty grass, mouthing silent songs to accompany the music that filled the air. Others sat blank-eyed, staring at the space where life used to be. And in a wooden temple, they found the chief and his wives, sprawled at the feet of his daughter. Oblivious to the intruders, she sucked on the end of a crystal pipe and tried to find the right words to go with the tune that ate her brain.

Spigweed picked up the bag of cocaine. Prewitt took the cowl from the woman's head and the beatbox from her side. "I wish," he said, "that you live for a thousand years, and that all the time your need, your craving never goes away, is never ever satisfied."

Then the two soldiers, as was their due, killed the men and raped the women of Azul. The chief's daughter alone was left untouched. Hollow-eyed and full of need, they left her pleading for that which she would never have again. They fled Azul before the sun went down and wished themselves not back at their jungle home, but in Las Vegas, surrounded by showgirls and dressed in the finest designer clothes that drug money could buy.

A few coins were tossed into an ashtray on the table. One or two people drifted away, their appetite for wonder satisfied for another day or two.

"Have another beer," an American said, sticking a five-dollar bill in Joe's shirt pocket. "And tell us about the fucking crows."

Joe nodded, but before he could begin I leaned forward and placed a photograph in front of him. It was a black-and-white picture of an African woman in a sequined gown, dancing on a spotlit stage. He picked it up and stared at it for a second or two, before his eyes sought out mine. "Hannie?" he said.

"That's not my name," I said.

"Where'd you get this?"

"She's just a dancing girl."

"No, she was more than that. She was all the world to me."

"Come on, man," the American said. "Let the fucker speak."

Joe smiled a sheepish smile, as if he'd just remembered what he was there for. Which was to perform. "Thirsty work," he said, holding the picture tight in his fist. "Now listen."

## 2. A Word on a Wing

Long ago in a foreign land there was a good soldier by the name of Sergeant Stryker who worked hard and saved all his money instead of spending it on drinking and whoring. At this particular time, he found

himself with the task force sent to capture an evil General who would let no ships sail through the kingdom of Panama. Stryker had two friends, fellow sergeants, but unlike him, they gambled heavily in the city's casinos and were mighty envious of the good soldier's thrift. After brooding and plotting together, they determined to relieve their friend of his money.

Now these two villains knew that Stryker was a keen photographer, and that he liked to use his free time to go on jungle shoots, or up into the mountains to get a panoramic view of the Gatun basin.

One evening, these two treacherous rogues stalked Stryker as he followed a dusty path above Rio Abajo. At a bend in the path, they overtook him and beat him to a pulp. Blood ran from his ears and his eyes clouded with pain. They took his money and cameras, and left him to die beneath a blooming Jacaranda tree. But he didn't die; instead, he came to in the middle of the night and, being a God-fearing man, he began to pray.

As he prayed, a sound of beating wings impinged on his awareness. He looked up through bruised eyelids and saw three large crows fluttering round his head. After a while they settled on the ferny branches and began to speak to each other. Unable to move, he lay beneath the tree, listening.

"Sister, what is the best news with you today?" one crow said.

The second crow stretched its wings to darken the night. It said, "Oh, if men but knew what we know! The General is hiding from the *yanquis* and they will never find him."

"Not unless they search in the right place and play the right music to draw him out," the third crow said.

"If men but knew," said the second, and then revealed where the wicked General was, and the music that would lure him out of hiding.

Soon afterwards, the crows had done talking and flew away. When dawn came, Stryker crawled down into a ditch behind the tree and drank from the water that had collected there. Strengthened by this, he gathered himself up and staggered along the path till he came to the main road back to Panama City. He collapsed then, and woke to find that a slender woman had come to his aid. Her eyes were green pools of enchantment, and as if by magic she raised him up and carried him to her silver Nissan. Then she drove him back to his unit where, in his delirium, he asked her to marry him.

Touched by his tender naivete, she gently refused. After all, he was only a sergeant and she was looking for officer material. But Stryker was a determined man, and, remembering the words he had overheard, he resolved to make use of them.

The siege of the General's palace had proved fruitless. The soldiers had no sure way of knowing if he was inside, or if and when he would give himself up. Stryker went to see his captain and suggested they direct their efforts to another building not too far from the palace. The captain was inclined to dismiss the bruised and scruffy sergeant, thinking it impossible that he could know what army intelligence had failed to discover. But Stryker was made of sterner



stuff and he persisted. He went to a music store and purchased a certain CD. He explained to the captain that if a sound system was rigged up and this particular piece of music was broadcast continuously throughout the night and day to the building he had indicated, then the General would soon despair and give himself up.

Despite the implausibility of Stryker's suggestion, the captain decided to give it a try. In truth, he was at his wits' end. Back home the President had appeared on television telling his people that the General would be in custody by the end of the week. Then the President had talked on the telephone with the army chiefs, and the army chiefs had in turn told the captain that if he failed to deliver the goods, it would be a black mark on his career.

And so he instructed Stryker to make the necessary arrangements, and thus it was that after two days and nights of having his tranquillity disturbed by music he had not called for, the evil General surrendered himself to his enemies.

The President made political gain out of this magnificent victory; the captain's unblemished career was back on the fast track, and Stryker was rewarded with a commission. And as was only fitting, he won the heart of the beautiful enchantress who had come to his aid. Some time afterwards, he walked in the hills above Panama City and came across the same two comrades who had beaten and robbed him. Afraid now of his new rank, they begged forgiveness.

"Look fellas," he told them, "don't embarrass me. Forget it, you guys needed the money more than I did."

"Jesus, Stryker," one man said. "That's Goddamn decent of you."

"I'll tell you what," Stryker said. "That place you left me? I heard something there that changed my whole life. It's a place of luck, gentlemen. I don't see why you two shouldn't have a piece of it. Go and listen to what the birds have to say."

When Stryker had departed, the two thieves hurried to that spot above Rio Abajo. They found the old Jacaranda tree in purple bloom, and settled themselves comfortably beneath its cooling limbs. Shortly after the sun went down, they heard a fluttering from overhead. Looking up they saw three crows circle the tree, then settle on its uppermost branches.

"Sisters," one crow said, "I fear some blackguards eavesdropped on us not so long ago, for the music has been played and the General has surrendered himself to his enemies."

"Yes," said another. "Perhaps if we call our brethren, they will help us search out these sneaks."

Soon the air was filled with a mighty thrum of wings and the cawing of thousands of birds. The two men were filled with terror and tried to run but, too late! The birds swooped down on them with sharpened beaks and raking talons and left behind only rags and whitened bones.

A Cuban-Chinese in a pinstripe suit staggered up to Joe. "'S'all lies and bullshit," he said, slurring. "How you know any a this stuff?"

Joe looked up at him. "You don't like the story, pal,

you don't have to listen."

"Same old shit, ev'ry night," the drunk said, as he reached into his jacket pocket for the switchblade he kept there. But I had already relieved him of the weapon and now he just looked stupid as he thrust nothing towards Joe's face. He stared at his empty hand, confused, then looked at the faces of the gathered crowd. "Fuck it," he muttered, then stumbled away to hide his shame in the night.

A few others drifted from the table, unsettled by the incident. Joe said, "I got plenty more where they come from."

I pulled my chair closer to the table and spoke just to him. "What do you do when the fabric of the tale becomes unwoven?"

He frowned, letting his gaze wander from the photograph to my face. He said, "Haven't seen you before. Just got in to town?"

"I've been travelling, Joe," I said. "This guided me here." I pulled a Saint Christopher medal on a silver chain from my pocket and placed it in the palm of his hand.

"Useta have one just like it," he said. "About that girl, Hannie ... you seen her down in Jo'burg?"

I shrugged my shoulders, not wanting to get his hopes up.

"You came just to hear my stories?"

"That's part of it," I said. "But there's one in particular that you never finished, Joe."

He shook his head, sadly. "What you said about the fabric, I think I understand. A guy once said, 'It's not just children who can be fobbed off with fairy tales.' He meant words can fool people."

"No," I said. "He meant the words show us what to do."

### 3. Dancing in the Dark

There was a war in the desert between a bullying khalif and his neighbour, the sharif. This sharif was a decent guy blessed with riches and a fine daughter whose name was Sufiya. When the war came, the people grew unruly and the sharif fled with his daughter to the kingdom of his friend the sultan. Armies were raised against the evil khalif, but in the meantime Sufiya fell under the spell of western ways, which were at that time considered inappropriate. The sharif found it hard to keep track of her movements, and so was forced to offer a large reward to any man who could let him know what she got up to each night. He made one proviso: it was that any man who volunteered for the task and failed would have his head cut off.

Throughout the first few weeks of the war, many heroes attempted to discover the mysterious, nocturnal habits of Sufiya. All failed and so lost their heads.

And then the Americans, too, came to the sharif's aid. It happened that one among them suffered terrible wounds in a Scud attack, losing an arm, a leg and an eye. Yet, he refused to dwell on his misfortune and soon discharged himself from the military hospital. Cutter – for that was his name – spent his days wandering the fearful city, through the casbah, past white mosques with slender minarets that



shimmered in the desert heat. At a stall where he drank coffee and smoked hashish, he overheard two men talking about the sharif's offer, and imagined that he might be the one to discover Sufiya's secret.

An old woman hovered nearby, watching him closely. "You look troubled, soldier," she said.

"I'm thinking about Sufiya," Cutter said, the dope loosening his tongue. "Thinking that a guy in my situation could use that dough."

The crone disappeared into the depths of the stall and returned with a turban and a plain white djellaba. "As soon as you put these on you will become invisible. You will be able to follow Sufiya without her knowledge."

Cutter listened to her counsel and decided to chance his one remaining arm. So he went to the sharif and volunteered for the job. The sharif was unimpressed with Cutter's shortage of limbs but he was running out of options and so agreed to let the American try to uncover Sufiya's secret.

That evening in the sultan's household there was much celebration over the destruction of an enemy fortress. People ate and drank till they were sated, not knowing that servants loyal to Sufiya had drugged the feast. All fell unconscious except Cutter who had neither drunk nor eaten. He pulled on his cloak and turban and, unseen, he saw Sufiya emerge from her rooms. She wore black stockings and a red micro skirt, with a sheer blouse that failed to hide her ample bosom. Cutter whistled to himself, startling Sufiya. Her eyes searched the shadows, but seeing nothing she left the palace and was met outside by a handsome young man on a motorbike.

Cutter failed to stop the first three cabs that rolled by, forgetting for a moment his invisibility. Remembering, he removed the cloak and managed to hail a cab. He followed Sufiya and her lover to a nightclub at a western hotel. There he watched as she and Pierre, the son of a French diplomat, danced the night away. And more.

In the morning, the Sharif demanded to be told where Sufiya had been. But Cutter had no proof as yet and so held his tongue. Tomorrow, he said, he would reveal all. "You'd better," the sharif's right-hand man translated, "or your head will go the same way as your limbs."

Cutter bought a camera and that night he used up a full roll of film on Sufiya's dancefloor performance. The grace and fluidity with which her body moved to the sound of Prince was almost enough to make Cutter forget the deal. Almost, but not quite. The next morning, he gave 24 photographs to the sharif. They showed Sufiya dancing with Pierre, and touching and, worst of all, kissing. The sharif was aghast. Five hundred thousand dollars was quickly brought to Cutter. The sharif said, "Were you of the Faith, I would offer you her hand. But as you are an infidel, I am sure the money will suffice."

Cutter nodded his agreement. Later that day he stood in line in the market square, the only American among hundreds of Arabs who watched as Sufiya was bound and stuffed in a large cloth sack. Her screams were muffled as she wriggled furiously

inside it. Then the first few small stones were thrown, with reluctance it seemed; but at the passionate urging of a mullah, larger stones began to rain down on the sack, pummelling her body with pious fury. The sack jerked and thrashed this way and that as dark stains spread over its surface. The stones grew larger and heavier and harder, till finally the sack was stilled, a scarlet pulp in the middle of the square. Cutter flew home that evening, a rich, contented man.

"Hey man," a young punk said. "You told that shit last night."

"He's repeating himself," a woman said. "Nothing new to say."

"That's the way it's supposed to be," I said in Joe's defence, knowing they wouldn't understand. You can change the minor details, but not the substance. "You told it right, Joe."

"All I wanted is my share of what's mine," Joe said wearily.

I put a Purple Heart on the table. He picked it up, examined it closely, and then pinned it on his shirt. "Why are you giving me these things?" he said.

"To make you whole again."

"So tell why Cutter would do that," the woman demanded.

Joe looked at her. "There's no why or wherefore in these tales."

The punk said, "Bastard's starting to moralize; he sayin', if you get fucked over, make sure you go and fuck someone else up, right?"

"There is no moral," I said. "Only patterns."

Joe turned towards me and said, "What do you mean you wanna make me whole again?"

"This isn't what you were meant for," I explained. "This is not how it was meant to turn out."

"I'm not going back."

"There are certain things you must do. People have expectations."

"Who? Hannie?"

"She's one, yes."

"And who're the others?" Joe said, unable to hide his bitterness.

"Those who listen, those who observe. You tell these tales but not your own."

"I'm not in any of them."

"In any you've told."

"Like the tale of North."

#### 4. Tinderheart

North was a man in whose heart there burned a fierce and raging love for his country. He had dedicated his life to serving his flag as best he could. On land and sea and in the air, North had waged battle against numerous enemies, but now, nearing the twilight of his soldiering years, he found himself stuck in the middle of a war which he could not comprehend. North came into this country with 18,000 men a few weeks before Christmas, and watched his comrades celebrate the season with confetti snow and talk about how they'd all be home by Easter. Their mission, they were told, was to protect food-aid convoys, but



that didn't strike North as much of a war objective. From the start, it wasn't his type of war. It was neither clean nor efficient, and was governed by no rules that he could understand. As time passed and paranoia took root in his mind, he began to pray for an insight into what he was supposed to be fighting for.

One evening, out of uniform, he drifted through the shattered suburbs of Mogadishu, lost in welcome reverie of the glory that awaited him back home. Had he not done his duty? Had he not listened to God and acted according to the American way?

These questions preoccupied him as he passed an old woman peering down into a well. She spied North and called him over. Curious, he walked across the empty street. The old woman stepped back from the well and said, "I dropped something dear to me down the well. I can't get it because I'm too old. Will you help me, soldier?"

North looked into the well, saw the metal rungs fixed into the wall. "What is it?" he said.

"Just an old memento," the old woman said. "If you go and fetch it for me, I'll make sure you get paid."

"How will you pay me?"

The old woman sighed and shrugged her shoulders. "I have a lovely daughter," she said.

North told himself that he wasn't interested in the woman's daughter, yet at the same time he had a burning compulsion to please. Without another word, he climbed over the wall and down the deep, dark well. At the bottom he found a small metal box nestling in the dried mud. He put it inside his shirt and climbed back up.

"You get it?" the woman said.

He nodded, showing it to her. Her eyes lit up with desire and a broad grin cracked her face. "Good," she said. "Let me have it now."

"First, tell me what it is," North said.

"You done me the favour, now give it to me," the old woman said, a note of hysteria entering her voice.

North smiled, enjoying the power he had over the crone. For the first time in this country, he felt in control. "What about your daughter?"

"I lied. Now give me the box."

"Not until you tell me what it is."

Without warning, the old woman threw herself at him, snarling and trying to rake his face with her nails. He reacted instinctively, as he had been taught to do. He snapped her neck and threw her body down the well.

Later, North sat in the dark of a derelict church, feeling alone and sorry for himself. He felt that his fellow soldiers no longer understood him. They seemed to lack his motivations – to them, soldiering was just a job, something you did to avoid welfare; the old values and certainties no longer had the same currency. If only there was someone he could talk to, someone who would listen and tell him he was doing the right thing. He closed his eyes and tried to picture God but God failed to put in an appearance. North reached in his shirt pocket for a cigarette and felt the little box there. He had quite forgotten it. The box opened when he pressed a small button. A blue flame flickered into life. Some

sort of antiquated African Zippo, he guessed, then lit his cigarette from the flame.

A thickset, powerful-looking dog appeared in the pew next to him. It looked like a 200-pound pit bull. It winked once, then yawned. "So, what do you want?" the dog said.

"Oh, Lord," North said, feeling reason slip from his mind. "What is this?"

"Look, you called and I came," the dog said. "Now just tell me what you want."

"I never called you."

"Listen to me, I don't want to explain it more than once. If you take a light from the flame, then that's the signal for me to come running. Now you get to wish for what you really want. So go ahead."

North wondered if he had truly lost his mind, or if this was some test devised by God. Either way, he felt he had to respond. He said, "I want someone who'll listen to me."

A young woman appeared before him, startled and afraid. She backed away from him, towards the broken altar. "It's okay," North said. "I don't mean any harm. I just want to talk."

The woman's eyes burned with feverish intensity. Her ebony skin melded with the shadows. Dry-throated, North moved towards her, holding out a hand. "Listen to me, I'm here to help you." The words seemed to clot in his mouth and he felt his heart began to dance crazily in his chest. "All I want is some respect." The air vibrated in the stifling gloom. The woman retreated, then stumbled and fell. She screamed, perhaps involuntarily. North lurched forward and caught her in his powerful arms. He forced his mouth against hers, drowning her next scream in his desire. She struggled furiously, not allowing him to explain. She wouldn't listen at all, so finally, he did the thing he really wanted.

Afterwards, he lit a cigarette and when the dog appeared, he ordered it to dump the body.

Thus did North assume a new kind of power. Each night thereafter he would wander alone to some forlorn spot and instruct the dog to bring him women from the enemy territory of Wardigley. This was a special power that had been granted him, one way to strike back in this hellish war. For two months, he indulged his desires, sating himself on the women-folk of the Warlord.

But the Warlord was not without cunning. He paid an ancient Somali warrior who was skilled in the old ways of hunting and tracking, to trail the dog and see where it carried the maidens. Armed only with a spear, he found the dog's urine scent against a tree. Once detected, he could never lose it. The next night, the Warlord's men followed him right to the lonely spot outside Mogadishu where North was explaining his moral philosophy to yet another uncomprehending woman. They grabbed North and carried him back to the Warlord. After a quick trial during which he was found guilty of numerous counts of rape and murder, he was sentenced to death.

As he stood bravely in front of the firing squad, North made one last request. "A cigarette," he said. "Got a light here in my pocket."



Of course the dog appeared, and on his master's command he tore the firing squad to shreds and then set upon the gathered spectators. North escaped, reaching his unit before dawn.

The next day, reflecting on his long career and feeling that he had had a lucky escape, North told the dog he wanted to go home. He also said that one day he would like to become a senator. The dog said he would make arrangements. A week later, 18 of North's fellow soldiers were massacred by the Warlord's people, their bodies dragged naked through the streets and finally burned. Immediately, North's President changed policy and ordered a mass withdrawal of men and arms, saying what North had said all along: that this wasn't a proper war, that there was nothing to be gained, that God had no interest in Mogadishu.

North flew home to his wife and five children, and the possibility of a future in politics, believing as he had always believed, in the power of positive praying.

By the time Joe fell silent, I was all that remained of his audience. Maybe they'd heard the tales once too often, or maybe the seeds of fear I'd planted in their minds had come to bloom. He drained his glass and belched. "The end," he said.

"That's not the end," I told him.

"Fuck you," Joe snapped. "You don't know what you're talking about. I let no one down. I did my fucking duty, man, I did more than I should have done."

"She still dances for you, Joe."

"Liar. She dances for anyone but me. To me, she was unattainable, always out of reach. I never even got the chance to speak one fucking word to her."

"So you quit? Deserted your post?"

"No!"

"Tell me your own story, Joe."

A great sigh shook his body as he tried to gather his thoughts. The photograph in his hand seemed to give him strength. "I signed up with a bunch of mercenaries and went north to Rwanda to help out the RPF. I thought I'd seen it all, every kind of sick degradation and madness, but I hadn't, not until then. In Kigali a Hutu shell landed almost on top of me. I ended up in a Red Cross camp where they hacked off my fucking leg. For weeks I lay there listening to Hutu radio broadcasts calling on the militia to wipe out the *inyenzi*, which means cockroaches, which is their word for Tutsis. And Christ, did the people respond.

"I heard the screams of tiny children as they were dragged from their homes and hacked to pieces in the street. I saw their parents beaten to death and their bodies piled by the side of the road and, like the peacekeepers and aid workers, I lay there and did nothing to make it stop.

"Don't speak to me of duty. The only duty I had left was to myself. The medics fitted me with an artificial limb and as soon as I could get around I stole a jeep and fled. I followed the Kagero river for 50 miles, till I ran out of gas. The sun was sinking slowly into the river, staining it red. I crawled to the water's edge and drank, then saw what was carried

along in the middle of the strong current. The dead, thousands of them flowing down to some liquid purgatory. It was the final insanity. I slipped into the water and let my bloated friends bear me along for three days and nights, till the river spewed us out into Lake Victoria. A Ugandan fisherman helped me from the water. Eventually, I made my way back to Johannesburg. I watched Hannie dance and I longed for her to notice me but she never did. I realized then that fate had screwed me. Why should I be the one who always followed orders, the loyal, dutiful GI fucking Joe? They took my leg, my heart and my girl."

"And what have you got now?" I asked him. "Only disappointment and failure. We want you back among us, Joe. You belong to us, to me, to Ashputtel, to Faithful John, Rumpelstiltskin and all the others. Only we know what's right for you."

"What should I do?" he said, his voice brittle in the gloom.

"Play your part," I said, pulling a uniform from my case. I held it up for him, letting him get used to the idea. "Put it on."

"I'm scared," he said, as he took it from me and disappeared into a back room.

He limped out ten minutes later, dressed in the shining new uniform with the purple heart pinned to his chest. He seemed to glow with pride as he saluted me. It wasn't much of a salute, but then again, with that leg, Joe was no longer much of a soldier. "Awaiting orders, Sir," he said.

I spread a deck of cards with naked girls on the back across the table. "Choose one," I said.

He sifted through the deck, taking his time, till finally, he picked up the queen of hearts. He held it up to show me the girl on the back. It was Hannie. "Loyal and true to the bitter end," he said.

"That's it." I passed him a rifle. "I have to go now, but you stay alert. Nobody will ever say that you failed in your duty." I stood up and saluted him, then marched slowly from the bar, leaving the suitcase behind.

I stopped a hundred metres up the street, and turned to wait for the end. I saw him through the window as he stood steadfast with shouldered arms. A second later the bomb exploded and a yellow fireball appeared above the place where the bar used to be. I waited for the flames to die down, then I walked back to the ruin and picked a careful path through the charred and smoking timbers, sifting through the debris. Scattered over the floor was the blackened deck of cards. Crouching down I found the smouldering queen of hearts and next to it on the floor, a melted purple heart.

All's well in the Kingdom, I thought, permitting myself a smile. Then I wished I was back in my own world, and, a moment later, I was.

**Mike O'Driscoll** is a newcomer to *Interzone* but his fiction has appeared fairly widely in the small press and he has recently sold a story to the forthcoming anthology *Alien Sex 2* (edited by Ellen Datlow). He lives in Swansea, South Wales.



# DAVID H. KELLER

Brian Stableford

David H. Keller was already middle-aged when his wife showed him a copy of Hugo Gernsback's newly-founded *Amazing Stories* in 1926 and suggested that he might try to write for it. Gernsback was so enamoured of Keller's first submission, "The Revolt of the Pedestrians" – which he published in 1928 – that he immediately offered a commission for a dozen more stories at the unusually generous rate of \$60 apiece.

Keller promptly became Gernsback's most prolific contributor, publishing a veritable flood of stories in 1928 and 1929 under the spur of a period of financial hardship which forced him briefly to rely on his pen for a living. He quickly branched out into the writing of articles on psychoanalysis for a periodical run by Gernsback's brother Sidney, horror stories for *Weird Tales* and mundane fiction for *Ten Story Book* (where it appeared under the byline Amy Worth). His productivity declined steadily thereafter, and he published very little science fiction once Gernsback had left the scene, but he made a crucial contribution to the early development of the genre. He was the first author of original material to be widely featured in the specialist pulps and his early stories made a deep impression on many of their readers.

Most of the new authors recruited to Gernsback's cause were young men whose imaginations had been fired by the pulps, but the most significant writers of the late '20s and early '30s were mature men who had been writing imaginative fiction for some time without being able to find an appropriate market: Keller, Stanton A. Coblentz, John Taine and Stanley G. Weinbaum. Keller was the oldest of these, having been born in 1880, in Philadelphia.

In his infancy Keller had extraordinary difficulty in learning to make himself understood verbally, and had to be placed in a remedial school until he was nine. Because language was something which he had been forced to acquire by artifice rather than by nature – as other

people seemed to do – it remained an object of special fascination to him; he became a prolific writer for his own private purposes. The chief legacy of this fascination was a curiously painstaking and seemingly naïve literary style, which gave many of his stories an eccentric fabular quality. He used his own experiences as the seed of the intriguing sf story "The Lost Language" (1934).

After transferring to grammar school Keller quickly made up lost ground and overtook his contemporaries. He began writing fiction and poetry at 14, and was ambitious to follow an academic career, but his father would not finance his studies unless they were aimed towards a conventional profession, so he entered Medical School. While there he published several stories in amateur publications, including several – under the pseudonym Henry Cecil – in *The White Owl*, a periodical imitative of the influential "little magazine" *The Black Cat*. *The Black Cat*, which published Jack London's first story and several notable fantasies, owed its own inspiration to the literary magazines of Paris; *Le chat noir* had been the periodical which launched the Decadent Movement.

Keller eventually became a "horse-and-buggy doctor" in a small town in Pennsylvania, but that position came to an end in 1914, after which he held a number of equally unhappy short-term appointments before serving in the Medical Corps when America became involved in World War I. From 1919-29 he worked in a state hospital in Pineville, Louisiana, but quit in disgust when Huey Long was elected governor (it was this move which required him to live for a while on the proceeds of his writing). Keller had been writing prolifically throughout his time at Pineville, producing numerous novels and novellas – some of which were to form the basis of published work in a later phase of his career – but publishing only a history of his family, *The Kellers of Hamilton Township* (1922) and a volume of poetry signed Henry Cecil. Cecil was a surname borrowed

from a branch of his family, which is frequently attached to characters in his fiction; Hubler was another name likewise associated with some of his ancestors and routinely attached to his fictional *alter egos*.

After briefly holding other posts, Keller settled down again in the state hospital for the feeble-minded at Pennhurst, Pennsylvania, remaining there for nearly five years. He then returned to his "ancestral home" in Monroe County, a house named Underwood, with the intention of devoting himself to literary work for the rest of his life. He still held a commission in the Medical Reserve, though, and he was recalled to active duty as a teacher at the Army Chaplain's School in 1941, remaining there until his retirement in 1945. His retirement was followed by a renewal of his literary activity, but he hardly ever bothered to submit his work for publication. His "professional career," such as it was, continued with the reissuing of much of his pulp fiction by reprint magazines and the small presses specializing in sf, but most of the work which appeared for the first time in this period had been written much earlier. He continued writing until he died in 1966, but very little of his later work saw print in any form.

It is easy enough to understand why Hugo Gernsback was keen to enlist Keller in the ranks of *Amazing's* contributors. He was a man of the same generation (Gernsback was four years younger than he), his medical degree lent a welcome aura of authority to his work, and that work displayed – to begin with, at least – a vivid inventiveness. The views of the two men were, however, markedly different. Keller had nothing like the extravagant enthusiasm for the coming "Atom-Electronic Age" that Gernsback professed and was ambitious to promote. Keller's science fiction mostly consists of cautionary tales which warn that rapid and reckless technological advance has the potential to reduce or obliterate the quality of human life. The methods he used in making this point were unashamedly melodramatic,



often visiting death and destruction on a massive scale upon those characters foolish enough to be seduced by their technology. In "The Revolt of the Pedestrians," a ruling caste of automobilists whose lower limbs have atrophied through long disuse is casually condemned to extinction by the lower orders whose rights they stubbornly refuse to recognize.

Keller was no simple-minded reactionary opposed to any and all technological progress, but he did have a marked Luddite streak. He was deeply anxious about the particular ways in which technology was being applied in contemporary society, within the economic context provided by industrial capitalism. One of the most graphic of his early stories was "Stenographer's Hands" (1928), in which an industrial magnate embarks upon a programme of selective breeding in order to produce individuals uniquely adapted for secretarial work. Unfortunately, the development of adept fingers and a docile temperament is correlated with a more general deterioration which results in a race of "degenerate epileptics."

Exactly what Keller's political views were remains unclear – his reaction to Long's election and his sf both offer much clearer evidence of what he was against than of what he was for – but he certainly had strong feelings about contemporary trends towards "degeneracy" and he was firmly attached to the notion that contemporary civilization was in some way "sick." In his fiction, at least, he was perfectly happy to contemplate Draconian attempts to cure this sickness – a willingness which makes some of his stories monstrously offensive to the modern eye. His occasionally rampant racism and his seemingly firm belief in negative eugenics are given lavish expression in the four-part tale "The Menace" (1928). In this story-sequence negroes who contrive to turn themselves white are summarily dealt with, and its climax features the extermination of all "insane" individuals – who constitute, by this time, more than 99% of the population because living under glass has denied virtually everyone the sanity-promoting effects of direct sunlight. "The Yeast Men" (1928) which describes a bizarre kind of biological warfare, features a similarly drastic winnowing process.

Keller also wrote tales of future domestic life, which are much less melodramatic but are equally uninhibited in their own fashion. Most of his stories in this vein exhibit an extraordinarily indulgent sentimentality. "A Biological Experiment" (1928) tells the story of a couple who rediscover the joys of natural parenthood in a world where the standard method of reproduction is ectogenetic. In "Unlocking the Past" (1928) a mother refuses to allow her child to participate in an experiment to revive ancestral memories when a dream reminds her

technological advancement are, however, most heartfully summed up in a vivid dream-sequence in "The Threat of the Robot" (1929), whose protagonist foresees automation causing mass unemployment:

In those dreams Ball saw the gradual starvation of society, first, for the real pleasures of life, then for the comforts, and later on for the actual necessities. He visioned parades of unemployed workingmen, demanding of capital a right to earn a living. But these very parades were policed by robots with blue-coats on who were very perfect in preserving order by

mechanically-wielded batons.

In his dream, Ball saw one strike a poor woman on the head. The baby that she carried dropped out of her lifeless arms and would have fallen to the pavement, but Ball caught it with one hand and struck the robot in the face with the other. At once he was the center of an attack from a dozen machines who pounded him into insensibility. As he fell, he tried to save the child, crying in his terror, "You are killing civilization, instead of the man."

But instead of hitting the concrete, he floated into the air, and the child turned into a football. Seeing that he had on the old football armor of former days, he plunged madly through the gathering crowds to make a touchdown. Helping him were two of his former friends who had died. They whispered to him that he could save the world from electrified machinery if he only wanted to.

In his first novel, *The Human Termites* (1929; reprinted as a chapbook 1979) Keller imagined human nations as

primitive "hive-minds" which are perceived as an emergent threat by the ancient hive-minds of the social insect species. The insects move to exterminate these upstart rivals, creating monstrous semi-human termites to serve as their armies. These co-opt, enslave and destroy the greater part of the human species before they are ultimately thwarted.

By this time, however, the highly-productive Keller was clearly running out of imaginative inspiration, and his work was beginning to seem tiredly repetitive. Another exercise in horrific giantism was "The Worm" (1929), an oddly effective story loaded with presumably-conscious symbolism in which a man living alone in an old mill struggles to preserve the edifice against the depredations of the horror gnawing

## THE REVOLT OF THE PEDESTRIANS by David H. Keller M.D.



of the likely unpleasantness of such memories. In "The Psychophonic Nurse" (1928) a mother belatedly realizes that she and her child are both suffering deprivation by virtue of her use of a mechanical nanny.

All these stories are innocent of any literary sophistication, but those which deal with biotechnology – as almost all Keller's work in this vein does to some degree – constitute a fascinating discourse on topics raised by J. B. S. Haldane in his classic futuristic essay *Daedalus; or, Science and the Future* (1923). Keller had almost certainly read this essay – as, of course, had Aldous Huxley, whose own alarmist ruminations on the themes thereof were later to be embodied in *Brave New World* (1932). Keller's anxieties about the human cost which might have to be paid for



away at its foundations.

Subsequently, however, his stories of giant insects decayed into vapid silliness, as exemplified by "The Flying Threat" (1930) and "The Solitary Hunters" (1934).

Mass unemployment threatens yet again in "White Collars" (1929), this time affecting the professional classes because of the over-production of college graduates. "The Feminine Metamorphosis" (1929) is a spectacularly nasty-minded exercise in unabashed male chauvinism and vicious racism, in much the same vein as "The Menace," to which it is a sequel of sorts. Here, women who employ a chemical method of masculinization in order to compete in a male-dominated world discover that all the Chinamen who have been castrated *en masse* to provide their supplies of testosterone are infected with a horrible disease (which is coyly left unnamed but is obviously syphilis).

Keller's second and third novels, "The Conquerors" (1929) and "The Evening Star" (1930), are sadly stereotyped exercises in pulp melodrama, the second being his only venture into interplanetary fantasy. Both seem to be straightforwardly derivative of other stories he had encountered in the pulps. The distinctive outlook and method of his earlier works continued to show in a small minority of his shorter stories, including "Free as the Air" (1931), in which entrepreneurs subject atmospheric oxygen to the logic of the marketplace, and "No More Tomorrows" (1932), about the effects of a curious elixir of life of dubious authenticity.

It was not until Keller's production schedule relaxed considerably that he was able to revert to more distinctive work. His fourth novel, "The Metal Doom" (1932) is easily the best of his pulp serials. It is a disaster story in which all metals are stricken by unnaturally rapid corrosion, forcing humanity to revert to Stone Age technologies. At the end of the story the main characters reflect on the lessons learned from their bitter experiences, and conclude that the collapse of their allegedly diseased civilization was after all a good and necessary thing. This recognition is swiftly followed by a *deus ex machina* which restores the metals so that the chastened human race might have a second chance.

Keller's next novel, "Life Everlasting" (1934; reprinted in *Life Everlasting and Other Tales of Fantasy and Horror*, 1947) adds a curious twist to this notion of a sick civilization. Here the world is transformed in a very different way by the discovery of a panacea which offers perfect physical, mental and

moral health to everyone, in perpetuity, imposing only one compensating penalty by virtue of rendering its eternally-youthful immortals sterile. The loss of the pleasures of parenthood proves so difficult to bear, however, that the discoverer of the panacea is urged to develop an antiserum. The author neglects to inform the reader as to whether this "cure" returns deviance and immorality to the world along with disease and deformity, and refrains from explaining why people could not simply have their children before using the immortality serum.

Keller was to become increasingly interested in the "chemistry of morality," which is a minor theme in "Life Everlasting." "The Tree of Life" (1934) features a drug which obliterates the moral inhibitions of the inhabitants of a village – a thought-experiment repeated on a larger scale in the most interesting of his later works, the novella "The Abyss," which was sufficiently shocking to preclude publication in a magazine medium dominated by strict taboos, and eventually appeared in the private press book *The Solitary Hunters and the Abyss* (1948).

Keller's most effective work of the mid- and late 1930s consisted of psychological horror stories and *contes cruels*, including the oft-reprinted "The Thing in the Cellar" (1932), in which a parent's attempt to prove to his child that there is no monster in the cellar by locking him in goes tragically awry. (The plot of the story has been frequently reproduced, presumably by independent inspiration.) "The Literary Corkscrew" (1934), in which a man whose creativity is linked to pain is equipped with a device which keeps his work conveniently up to standard, is similarly graphic. One of his "Amy Worth" stories, "A Piece of Linoleum" (1933) is a startling study of unthinking callousness, while "The Dead Woman" (1933) – in which a man becomes convinced that his wife is dead and kills her in consequence – proved too strong for the editors of the day and had to be given away to a fanzine (although it was reprinted in a pulp magazine in 1939). "The Doorbell" (1934) is another nasty-minded tale involving capsules containing fishhooks and a powerful magnet.

With Gernsback gradually moving out of the picture Keller seems to have had much greater difficulty finding markets for his science fiction in this period. "Unto us a Child is Born" (1933) is a moving story about the downside of positive eugenics, tracking the experiences of two gifted parents commissioned to produce a

very special child, but the very similar "The Mother" proved unsaleable and eventually appeared in a fan magazine in 1938.

Among the contacts which Keller made in the fan community was Regis Messac, then working as a college teacher in Montreal. When Messac returned to France he helped found a periodical called *Les Primaires*, for which he began translating some of Keller's work. Messac published a booklet of three translated pulp sf stories in 1936 and subsequently began issuing some of Keller's earlier works, including the novella which was eventually to see US publication as *The Eternal Conflict* (1939 in French; 1949) and four linked short stories, *The Sign of the Burning Hart* (1938; reprinted 1948). *The Eternal Conflict* is a remarkable allegorical fantasy based in the theories of Sigmund Freud, elaborately displaying the supposed symbolism of dreams in an attempted analysis of female psychology.

Encouraged by Messac's interest Keller rewrote two of his other early novellas as the novel *The Devil and the Doctor* (1940), an exercise in literary Satanism clearly inspired by two of his favourite authors, Anatole France and James Branch Cabell. Keller later recalled that Simon & Schuster, publishers of *The Devil and the Doctor*, seemed to repent of their decision and refused to take booksellers' orders long before remaindering their stock, perhaps because of pressure from religious groups who found the novel's portrayal of Satan as an urbane friend of mankind insufferable. It may have been this unhappy experience which caused Keller to revert almost exclusively to amateur status, never thereafter seeking mass-market publication for his work. A second exercise in literary Satanism, *The Homunculus* (1949), was eventually issued by the Prime Press, although the identity of the Devil is delicately obscured, presumably for diplomatic reasons. Another early novella *The Lady Decides* (1949) – a curious Quixotic romance in which one Henry Cecil embarks on an allegorical odyssey in Spain – was subsequently issued by the Prime Press as a companion to *The Eternal Conflict*.

Keller's last significant science-fiction story was "The Abyss," which was presumably the story he was referring to when he wrote a memoir of his life for *Fantasy Commentator* in 1947, saying "I am working on a novel centering around an idea that as far as I know is absolutely new to modern literature." It describes the events which follow the heavily-advertised marketing by an experimentally-inclined industrialist



of drugged chewing-gum to the inhabitants of New York City. As a result, the repressive legacy of two thousand years of civilization is stripped away, letting loose the rapacious appetites of the *id*. Although the theory supporting the plot is basically Freudian, Keller make explicit use of the ideas of Carl Jung in planning the grotesque imagery of the story. There is a political gloss which suggests that charismatic dictators like Nero and Hitler work in a not-dissimilar fashion to mobilize and channel the worst impulses of their subjects, but the real point of the story is the insistence that repression is a necessary and thoroughly good thing, and that the veneer of civilization covers a deep and terrible psychic abyss.

At first sight this message may seem to contrast sharply with that of "The Metal Doom," where civilization needs to be destroyed before it can be reconstructed along more reasonable lines, but there is no ideological conflict between the two stories. The remarkable surreal fantasy "The God Wheel" – which was presumably written in the same period as "The Abyss," appearing for the first time in Keller's second story-collection *Tales from Underwood* (1952) – reiterates the theme of cleansing the world of sickness by restoring Arcadian innocence. The apocalyptic violence celebrated here and so frequently unleashed in Keller's sf stories always erupts because the veneer of civilization has been brought to breaking-point by unbearable stress, and the author is always steadfast in support of what he considers the truly fundamental and absolutely necessary elements of "civilization": marital and parental love, respect for the rights of others, and a sort of polite tolerance which unfortunately did not extend to matters of race and sex.

Few readers would consider these unworthy objectives, as far as they go, and it is arguable that the oddest thing about Keller's work is that he should consider it necessary to go to such extreme imaginative lengths in championing such widely-accepted ideals. He works so very hard to achieve this end, and sometimes finds himself driven to such absurd lengths (as in "Life Everlasting") in order to make his point, that one can hardly help suspecting him of protesting a little too much. His commercial work – which includes almost all his sf – has not quite the same intensely

personal quality as those stories which are populated by lightly disguised and steadfastly eccentric avatars of himself (*The Devil and the Doctor*, *The Homunculus* and *The Lady Decides* are obvious examples) but it is at least possible that it gives plainer voice to the anxieties which haunted him. His many tales of marital disharmony and parental dissatisfaction, almost all of which are brought to sickly sweet but exaggeratedly contrived conclusions – "The Golden Bough" (1935) is a telling exception – may be more revealing than he intended. Given his training and long experience in psychiatric medicine, he must have been fully aware of the sexual symbolism which appears in many of the stories which he



claimed to have derived from dreams or to have written under "self-hypnosis" at the behest of his subconscious, and this might well have made him hypersensitively wary of the sinister side of his own repressed impulses.

David H. Keller is not quite forgotten today, although the last hardcover collection of his tales, *The Folsom Flint and Other Curious Tales* was issued in 1969 and it now seems unlikely that any more of his many unpublished novels will see the light. Some of his uncollected pulp stories were reprinted in the late 1960s during the period when *Amazing*

*Stories* became part of a chain of reprint magazines cannibalizing the legacy of its earlier incarnations. Patrick and Dixie Adkins' P.D.A. Enterprises began issuing "The David H. Keller Memorial Library" in 1978 but it only extended to two volumes before the project collapsed. It is, therefore, extremely difficult for the modern reader to gauge the extent of Keller's contribution to the early evolution of pulp sf, which was considerable and perhaps crucial.

Keller was the first writer to dabble extensively in stories of future biotechnology and to insist that the new ethical problems which would inevitably arise in connection with such technologies would be very awkward indeed. He wrote stories whose explicit moral was that marvellous inventions were worthless

unless they supported and sustained – or at least did not disrupt – the intimate personal relationships which are the warp and weft of human society. He helped to provide a useful counterweight to the extravagant adventure stories which were to become the staple diet of the sf pulps by writing stories calculated to disturb and by posing questions about the social role of technology which more technophilic writers were thereby forced to address.

The style which Keller employed for his science fiction was excruciatingly crude, and cannot pass therein – as it can and does in much of his other work – for calculatedly naïve charm. This is partly due to the fact that pulp sf writers in general had not yet contrived to standardize a vocabulary of images and a narrative method which would permit the construction of imaginary worlds without recourse to massively cumbersome info-dumping, but it testifies to his own inability to make significant headway in coping with such problems. It would, however, be a pity if this failure were to condemn his science fiction to remain unread while his supernatural fiction continues to command a certain esoteric respect. Perhaps it is only of antiquarian interest, and it certainly requires to be read with an understanding of its historical context, but it was both striking and challenging in its day, and the Gernsback magazines would have been poorer without it.



# An Unexpected Collaboration

Chris Gilmore

I begin this month's column with a distinct oddity. *Design for Great-  
Day* (Tor, \$21) is credited to Alan Dean Foster, whose earliest solo book dates from 1977, and Eric Frank Russell who died in 1978, having long quit writing. It's an expansion of a novella from 1953, and the first, most important point is that Foster has caught Russell's style perfectly: the joins are invisible.

That this is an unmixed blessing is less clear: Russell's style is full of slapstick, cod pomposity, and over-ripe descriptions of other people's stupidity – the style of the eternal bright schoolboy, using long and often ill-chosen words through the sheer delight of knowing (more-or-less) what they mean. As a schoolboy I admired him, as one admires a flattering portrait of oneself, but I hesitate to recommend him to an adult audience. There is no excuse for such base and barbarous coinages as "habitableness" (for habitability), and verbatim passages of ritualized banter among friends quickly become tedious.

The idea is similar to that behind *Sentinels from Space*, but developed on a larger stage. Two spacefaring races are at war; the war is conducted at long range, and threatens neither civilization with cultural collapse, but it's wasteful of resources, it corrupts less advanced races dragged on by both sides as allies/stooges and it impedes the flow of trade and cultural exchange in the region. The Solarian Combine, an alliance of many dissimilar species of which mankind is one, sets out to end the war, which would be easy enough given the enormous technological and mental superiority of the Solarians – they need only impose a *cordon sanitaire*. But that would not be a long-term solution; they intend not only to end the war, but to alter the mindsets of the opposing commanders so that it will never flare up again. They must be made to perceive the war as futile and their own part in it as ridiculous, and this must be accomplished not by crude mind-wrenching effects (of which the Solarians are capable, and which they use to achieve short-term goals) but by demonstration and persuasion.

Russell being Russell, the rhetorical weapons deployed are neither intellectual harangues nor

appeals to sentiment, but a combination of crude paradox and practical jokes, both delivered *de haut en bas* and backed with a conspicuous absence of physical force. The message, that of "And Then There Were None," is obvious, and eventually sinks in: "To enjoy our sort of mastery, you must become as we."

It's an intensely idealistic book and, of course, something of a cop-out – it takes for granted both the hugely superior mental capabilities of the Solarians and the fundamental reasonableness of the contenders: they may not be instantly convertible into nice people, but Gadarene Swine they aren't. I wish I could believe the same of all the world's present leaders.

It's been in the nature of science fiction from earliest times that it lends itself to moral and political subtexts, which is why so many of the distinguished forebears whom we claim are known in other circles as allegory or satire. Our less distinguished forebears include innumerable turgid utopian works. Utopias are thin of the ground in our current, atomized society; one more often encounters a hyper-idealistic individual or small group, seeking to establish a *modus vivendi* in a milieu dominated by brutal superstition, the Military Industrial Complex, crass plutocracy or whoever else last kicked sand in the writer's face. I call it the Lachrymose Tendency, and while the message may be much the same it's morally less attractive than Russell's gung-ho activism.

Alison Sinclair's *Legacies* (Millennium, £16.99) is a case in point, and before considering its contents I must take issue with Lucius Shepard, who states on the cover that "To describe Alison Sinclair as promising would be to do her an injustice. *Legacies* ... stands as a promise fully kept." I can imagine nothing more debilitating than for the author to believe him, as the book shows considerable potential marred by a number of corrigible bad habits.

As the title implies, Sinclair is concerned to consider the concept of guilt, both personal and inherited, in as many aspects as possible. Every major character has committed or profited from evil deeds of one sort or another, and is torn between the

desire to conceal and the urge to atone. Moreover, the entire culture of Taridwyn, from which Our Hero, Lian D'Halldt, springs, is racked by a collective guilt for which no atonement is possible. Five generations earlier they had fled their home world of Burdania in search of a better life elsewhere. To make good their escape they engaged the interstellar drive while very close to the planet, which they have surely devastated and may have destroyed in the process. They still regard their life as one of uncomfortable exile under a wrong-coloured sun, and yearn for the world they may have ruined. Now an expedition is returning to assess and report. It's a highly contrived situation, and made no less so by Lian's presence on board.

Lian had been a brilliant adolescent, but he has suffered severe and irreparable brain-damage in a fall. He is now physically frail and psychologically maimed – so much so that he has failed the rite of passage, which depends on the logical presentation of a complex argument. His gloomy self-assessment appears early:

He knew his lacks: memory, language, incisiveness of intellect, coordination. He had so little self that he kept losing it in the sun or the sea or the movement of leaves.

Such people are inherently dull; brain-damage implies a diminution. Moreover, such a person could have no place on an expedition of any importance. Sinclair is left with no option but to lie, both about what Lian is like and how he comes to be there, so that while Lian talks like a medium case of smoker's emphysema and is no good for heavy lifting, his intellect and character are fully and attractively developed.

That is really the trouble with the entire book. Sinclair has thoughts on a number of subjects which she uses the novel to impart, but she does so without regard for their relevance to the context. Like many another she is interested in the potential for emotional interaction and cultural contamination between humans and a non-industrial alien culture. Her handling of the autochthonous Kinder'el'ein of Taridwyn is a better than average – or would be, except that (she tells us) the Burdanians are not a future branch of the human race but *another* set of aliens. It's another lie; they are conceived as humans, their psychology, sociology and physical appearance are human, and to call them alien solves a minor problem of context but contributes nothing else.

On much the same principle, Sinclair has created a memorable



example of the villain who is his own greatest victim. Brilliant, manipulative, megalomaniacal, destructive of self and others Thovalt is also (insanely) included in the expedition. That such a man might not be entirely safe at the controls of a potential planet-wrecker occurs to no one, least of all Sinclair. Still, now that he's here ... he's also homosexual, so in case someone feels offended, Sinclair drops in an *homage* to gay love. It's glaringly out of place, both because of the sort of society where it's alleged to have happened, and because the rest of the book is rich with heterosexual tension.

Such blemishes prevent one from taking the book altogether seriously, and are the more to be deplored because *Legacies* contains so much that is admirable. It's a book that demands to be taken seriously, and to a great extent deserves it. Not a single individual scene fails to work, the emotional depth of the writing more than compensates for the occasional melodrama of the development, the Kinder'el'ein are the best sort of alien – approachable, even lovable, but never quite comprehensible – even the excessive use of flashback can be justified in terms of varying the scene. If Sinclair could have exercised a little discrimination among her ideas, instead of incorporating them harum-scarum as they came to her, this might have been a first novel of great distinction. As it is, I look forward to her next.

There's also something of the lachrymose in *The Black Gryphon*, which is billed as the first volume of a new trilogy by Mercedes Lackey and Larry Dixon (Millennium, £4.99), but the situation is a lot less contrived, allowing the characters to make more sense.

The setting is a standard-technology sword-&-sorcery war of good against evil, and as tends to happen the good side, led (in the absence of a King) by the Mage Urtho, is losing the war. The story is told from a number of viewpoints, of which the most important (so far) are Skandranon, the Black Gryphon of the title; Zhaneel, a young female gryphon; Winterhart, a female Healer attached to the camp; and Amberdrake, a male kestra'chern. This last term needs glossing, and not only for the reader. The skills of a kestra'chern are principally massage, psychoanalysis and sex therapy, and they deploy all three as needed on clients of both sexes and all species.

Not surprisingly, they are regarded by many (including some of their clients) as no better than high-class prostitutes, and indeed, the dangers of using such a character, especially as a viewpoint, are obvious: one need only think of Heinlein and Delany at their most rebarbative.

To get round this Lackey and Dixon don't lie, exactly, but tilt the emphasis. We only see Amberdrake solicited for buggery (mode unstated) on one occasion, and that is by a coarse and disagreeable bisexual mercenary, whom he turns down on professional grounds; whatever the man thinks, that's not the indicated therapy. Fair enough, but not all bisexuals are coarse and

before the tide turns. Nor are the allies fully in accord: healers resent kestra'chern; there is racial tension between Gryphons, a recently synthesized species, and humans; some of the generals have the Vimy Ridge mentality, and are despised for it; Urtho himself is distrusted for his aloofness; and it looks as if the mercenaries may change sides if things get much worse.

Altogether, the full trilogy (whatever it winds up being called) looks like being one of the better fantasy offerings, and if it fails to make the top rank it will be because L & D have a curious lack of confidence in their mastery of the language. It shows up in a habit of unnecessary emphasis, usually of unimportant words, in the manner of speech balloons in the dimmer US comics. The sentence "There was nothing like being told to hold still to make a gryphon wild for a good shake" is a perfectly acceptable item of commentary, but italicizing "nothing" and "wild," and adding an exclamation point, makes it read twee and insincere.

*Earth* (David Brin); *The World* (John Grant); *Songs of Earth and Power* (Greg Bear). What makes experienced writers propose (and experienced editors acquiesce to) such supremely naff titles? *Fate* by Mary Corran (Millennium, £16.99) is set in a country (Darrian) where the name of the principal city is Fate; others are called Omen, Chance and Venture (where most of the action is set); the moons are Aspire and Abate; and I must therefore haul on heavier hawser to suspend disbelief.

To be fair, the title has a justification, of sorts. The people of Darrian are obsessed with oracles, prophecies, divinations and fortune-telling, to the dismay of Asher, a young woman of forceful personality and logical mind, to whom the explicit determinism and implicit denial of free will are equally hateful. Indeed, much of the book is concerned with the many things Asher finds hateful, together with her determination not to be overwhelmed by them, and to thwart them so far as she can.

As a woman in a patriarchal society her capacity is circumscribed, but Asher is resourceful; she escapes her loveless marriage to live in Venture with a group of like-minded women, where she uses her position as a treasury clerk to embezzle modest sums which help finance an underground railway for runaway slaves. Asher is the only major viewpoint, and Corran has obviously devoted some care to delineating her character. While the effect is not entirely believable in the context –



disagreeable; by the end of this volume Lackey and Dixon have preserved the dignity of their character without too much strain, but I'm wondering how well they'll manage over three.

For this book is generously planned. At 330 pages it doesn't sound long, but Millennium have squeezed 40 lines to the page and there's comparatively little on-stage action until the last 30 pages, when there's a rather rushed climax. To make up for it there's plenty of process-writing, which serves to introduce the various characters and make them interesting in terms of their particular skills, but the interest is sustained by the burgeoning emotional relationships among the principals, plus a sense that the war will go a lot worse long



her worldview is much like that of a Fabian suffragette and pioneer of the Secular Society, c. 1910 – Asher is coherent and attractive enough to arouse and sustain interest.

Her dislike of prophecies etc. derives partly from being the survivor of twins, her brother (confusingly referred to as “identical”) having died at birth. To the people of Darrian this marks her as special, having the luck of two, and enjoying partial immunity from Fate. If so minded one can therefore account for some of her character, and especially her various rebellions, in terms of a Freudian guilt complex, the socially acceptable view being that a male survivor would have been preferable. It certainly adds to the tension when she is summoned to the temple and told that her own fate is intimately bound up with that of the ruling house of Darrian, currently very much in eclipse.

For Darrian has been conquered and reduced to client status by the Kamiri, an unpleasant, grey-skinned race who have re-introduced chattel-slavery and who are bleeding the country white with demands for tribute. The word of the oracle is that only Vallis, last surviving princess of the ruling line, can save the country; but she has disappeared, and it is Asher’s destiny to go in search of her, accompanied by Mallory, a childhood friend who re-enters her life in a manner which seems entirely too pat not to be fated in some sense.

Despite its unconventional features, *Fate* can therefore be categorized as a sword-&-sorcery quest novel. It also teases the reader with the possibility (by no means certain) that Asher and Mallory will find love with each other, a trick which Corran used in her previous *Imperial Light*. But despite the foolish nomenclature and some minor weaknesses in the internal logic, this book represents a very significant advance on that rather lacklustre volume (which I reviewed in *Interzone* 87). Corran hasn’t quite shed the habit of presenting ideas of unexceptionable orthodoxy as if they were inflammatory contraband, but now the technical skill which I noted last time has been harnessed to a story which makes sense in terms of the characters involved, most notably the principal villain, Avorian. He is extremely well conceived, having been originally a decent man of strong character who has gradually been corrupted by ambition, fatalism and the vanity which makes him refuse to admit a physical limitation which is in no way to his discredit. Character-driven sword & sorcery is uncommon, and I hope to see more from the same source.

Chris Gilmore

# The Exploration of the Future

Stephen Baxter

Freeman Dyson, quoted in the Greg Bear/Martin H. Greenberg hard-sf anthology *New Legends* (Legend, £15.99; Tor, \$22.95), says that “science fiction is... nothing more than the exploration of the future using the tools of science.” Certainly this is the heroic Campbellian view of sf – hard sf at least – which holds that science-fictional speculation can serve in feedback loops with “real” scientific endeavour to expand the frontiers of human understanding. But what does Bear’s anthology tell us of the state of hard sf in the 1990s? Is hard sf still capable of expanding our horizons?

Sadly, the future has not always been kind to our dreams. When the first Russian probe to penetrate the atmosphere of Venus – equipped to float about in oceans of soda water – was crushed a few miles below the acid clouds, a million hearts were crushed with it. The universe has become a bleak and hostile place, and the future bleaker still, a place to fear.

This fundamental fear shows up clearly in several of the stories in this anthology. “A Desperate Calculus” by Sterling Blake is a detailed but ultimately clumsy tale of the global Malthusian eco-collapse to come, and Greg Abraham and Geoffrey Landis depict future wars we are no doubt powerless to avert, although the latter’s piece is relieved by a sub-Dickian twist. Carter Scholz’s *Star Wars* parable already seems dated, and its themes are in any case better explored in Greg Benford’s interesting autobiographical essay.

The most serious criticism of these earnest, angst-ridden parables is that they do not satisfy the minimum requirement of a good hard-sf tale, which is a new central idea. Mary Rosenblum’s nicely-written “Elegy” does at least benefit from an original conceit – squid as group-mind – but the story is hamstrung by a telegraphed climax and a lurking Gaia moral.

Further, some of the tales here serve mainly to show us how far hard sf has developed in the last few decades. Ursula Le Guin’s “Coming of Age in Karhide,” set on her world of Gethen, is fine but familiar, and could have been written in 1970; the contributions from Robert Sheckley, George Alec Effinger and Poul Anderson merely show that modern hard sf requires a density of detail and a grasp of modern speculation beyond any of these pieces. Although Anderson’s story is set on Saturn’s chaotically-spinning moon Hyperion, his plot, about mad Asimovian robots, has the flavour of the 1940s.

Reassuringly, though, this collection does contain real gems.

Good hard sf has evidently become harder to bring off, but it is still possible! Our own Paul J McAuley’s “Recording Angel” is a tale of revolution in the remote future. Crammed with ideas and perhaps rather more wildly told than we have come to expect of McAuley, this story has pleasant resonances with earlier works, such as Aldiss’s “Old Hundredth” and Clarke’s *The City and the Stars*. Greg Egan’s “Wang’s Carpets” depicts

first contact in a transhuman interstellar future, and features a remarkably original conception of alien life. Both these tales are densely told, original and strange, and, in the best tradition of sf, update the themes of earlier generations with new narrative techniques and our best modern understanding of the world.

And the finest of the tales here, for me, is Greg Benford’s stunning “High Abyss.” Benford takes us to a world entirely new to sf – and so, if you think about it, new to human experience. This story may suffer the criticism of much hard sf – that its technical detail is overwhelming – but readers with the patience to get past that will encounter characters which are alien but utterly sympathetic, and a climax which uplifts us in a manner impossible





before this story was written. And this is what makes hard sf worthwhile.

Of all the classic subjects of hard sf, perhaps the most out of reach – and therefore the most stimulating – is time travel. This features in two stories in the Bear anthology, the McAuley and a satisfying piece by Robert Silverberg about a frustrated archaeologist having remote-future visions. Now Paul J. Nahin, a professor of Electrical Engineering at the University of New Hampshire, has given us *Time Machines* (Oxford University Press/AIP Press, £12.95), a monumental survey of time travel as a subject of speculation in physics, metaphysics and science fiction.

Nahin claims to have attempted to find every time-related story ever anthologized in English. So much of the fun for us train-spotters comes from looking for pieces Nahin missed (my list includes Eric Brown's "The Time Lapsed Man," 1988, and "Inheritors of Earth," 1990, and *Them Bones*, 1989, by Howard Waldrop...). However, Nahin's focus is not so much sf in itself but rather how sf has served to help develop the modern physicists' view of time travel. And here, for many readers, may come a surprise: we can think of at least four ways to travel backwards in time. These outlandish schemes, featuring long spinning cylinders and engineered wormholes, are proving robust in the face of earnest attempts at debunking. The problem is, you see, that if time travel is possible you have to face up to causal paradoxes. Nahin, using capsule summaries of old sf speculations, ably surveys the many ways proposed by philosophers and others to get around this.

With its breadth of intellectual scope *Time Machines* is supremely ambitious, but it is flawed. Many readers will, I suspect, find the more technical passages baffling. Essential illustrations are often separated from the relevant text. And the index and bibliography are inadequate: for example, the sf stories are not always listed with their year of original publication. However, Nahin shows that the old Campbellian feedback loops are still working, and that the hard-sf dream of time travel is slowly growing in scientific respectability, and – dare one say it – engineering feasibility.

We've been down this road before, of course. It would be wonderful to suppose that, among the readers of *New Legends* or Nahin's long, difficult but rewarding book, there will be somewhere the Tsiolkovsky of time travel...

Or even the von Braun.

Stephen Baxter

# Hell hath no fury

Peter Crowther

Only the very luckiest of writers can profess to have no experience of the dreaded Rejection Slip, that most hated of missives, whose brief *Thanks, but no thanks* message can sound the death-knell on literally months of work. But, in most cases, the writer proves to be a pragmatic and fatalistic beast who, while secretly voicing the old standby *Yeah, but what does he/she know!*, will usually "humour" the publisher and make the changes they suggest or request before returning the increasingly dog-eared manuscript to the mailing treadmill. But that's most writers. It isn't Harry Levine, the very determined antagonist in Chris Westwood's *Sight Unseen* (Piatkus, £14.99).

Levine's *Persistence of Vision*, a singularly turgid and virtually impenetrable novel, is his life's work. His baby. The fact that it really may not be very good has never occurred to him. And so, when New York publishing agent Edgar Chasen returns the weighty tome with the inevitable "not quite what publishers are looking for right now" message, Levine thinks there must surely be some mistake. Particularly as the letter is signed by one Sophie Hunt. When he calls Chasen to clear up the error, he discovers that the agent has not actually read the work himself but has rather had a freelance reader do the chore on his behalf. Levine suggests that Chasen reads the manuscript himself. "I respect your taste. An honest opinion is all I'm looking for," he tells Chasen, not unreasonably. Sadly, however, there is nothing at all reasonable about Harry Levine.

Nevertheless, Chasen capitulates and, against his better judgement, he takes the manuscript with him on a long weekend in the Catskills with his wife Hilary and young daughter Emma. Not too far into the book, Chasen comes to the conclusion that not only is Levine's "masterpiece" not publishable but also its creator may well be mentally ill. He abandons the read and returns the manuscript again, this time pulling no punches. Surely, this time, Levine will accept rejection? No chance!

A frenzied confrontation with the irate Levine in Chasen's office – during which the would-be author holds the agent and his secretary prisoner while Chasen reads the full script – is just the first step on an horrific ride into the depths of a desperately sick mind. For while the

confrontation is cut short – by means of a bill-spike sticking in Levine's side – it only amounts to a lost battle in Levine's eyes. "End of round one," he tells Chasen, with a menacing smile, before leaving the office via the window. "The best is yet to come." How true...

Writing about America like a native, Westwood skilfully piles pressure on top of pressure, moving the two main players around the board speedily and completely believably, and painting each new situation with fresh insights into a singularly tortured mind.

Chris Westwood's earlier novel, *Calling All Monsters*, was optioned by Steven Spielberg's Amblin' Entertainment company and is currently at the screenplay stage. A graduate of television and film production and a former music journalist, he has written several novels for younger readers including *A Light In the Black*, which was shortlisted for the Guardian Children's Fiction Award. *Sight Unseen*, his third novel for adults, should firmly establish him in the front ranks of suspense fiction.

It's too early to say what 1995's big books will be but Ed Gorman's *The Marilyn Tapes* (Forge, \$22.95) must surely be a prime contender, borrowing elements from all of the field's sub-genres... and doing it superbly well.

A striking combination of Tom Clancy's political thrillers and Elmore Leonard's hypnotically sassy novels of America's mean streets, *The Marilyn Tapes* also mixes in liberal doses of such mystery-and-suspense staples as the locked room, the psychotic stalker-killer (innovatively, in this case, a beautiful female FBI agent who's not averse to setting someone's head on fire to speed up answers to her questions) and nefarious deeds in the high places of power. And its mesmerizing blend of history and fiction is just so flawless that it's hard to know when the one ends and the other begins.

Moving at almost shorthand speed (and that's certainly the way you'll read it), the book recounts, in semi TV documentary style, the days immediately following Marilyn Monroe's death when it is discovered that the ill-fated star had recorded a series of audio tapes. These tapes, it is believed, detail her life, her loves, her dreams and her



disappointments... and, in so doing, provide the names of all those involved. A very desirable property indeed, particularly to the philandering President Jack Kennedy, the fanatical Edgar Hoover, head of the FBI, and the country's once-prominent gossip-queen, Louella Parsons... but it's also of considerable interest to a local private eye, a cop and a high-ranking mafia hoodlum.

Shifting the third-person focus between chapters – a practice which, with some of the chapters less than one page long, makes for a pretty dizzying read – Gorman builds the suspense and the anxiety until, with palpable relief, the many strands of the story (and the many people and agencies searching for the glittering prize) come together. The blistering final section (42 chapters in 67 pages!) recalls the best work of John D. MacDonald (particularly *Crossroads*). With such a strong backlist to his credit, a literary *tour de force* has been on the cards from Gorman for a long time... but its inevitability should not be allowed to overshadow its arrival.

The true power in any tale must always be in the telling and, in *Nailed By The Heart* (Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99), his debut, Simon Clark acquits himself admirably in this department.

Despite a slightly woolly explanation around the midway point as to the reasons for all that's happening, and a similarly less-than-completely-satisfactory conclusion, there's no denying the breathless intensity of this somewhat Lovecraftian story of ancient evil in a small English coastal village.

Chris and Ruth Stainforth decide to start afresh by moving from the city and buying an old sea-fort which they plan to convert into an hotel. Everything seems to be going well... except that one or two of the villagers seem a little wary of the Stainforths (particularly when they discover the reason they're there) and their six-year-old son, David, seems to be reacting to his new environment in a strange way.

Before long (but, of course, much too late), Chris and Ruth are told that the sleepy hamlet of Out-Butterwick and the tiny islet of Manshead, connected to the mainland by a narrow causeway that vanishes with the incoming tide, once served as the centre for an old religion. More to the point, their sea-fort, situated on Manshead itself, is, in effect, a kind of altar at which communication with the old god is possible. The cosmic power exuded by the god, a power which builds over time, is about to reach one of its rare critical points (the previous one being some 600

years earlier) and, responding to the localized changes brought on by the build-up, the ferocious Saf Dar, a team of crack mercenaries dispatched (unsuccessfully) many years ago to gain control of the power, have now returned from their watery grave in order to complete their mission.

The result is that, along with the other inhabitants of the village, the beleaguered family is forced to take refuge in their new home while the maniacal Saf Dar take up residence outside the walls and work on getting inside.

The sea-fort soon becomes a kind of *Alamo* or the *Stalag* in *The Great Escape*, except that neither Santa Anna nor the German guards possessed either the supernatural staying power or the sheer mindless depravity of the Saf Dar. Food has nearly run out, water is running out, the mercenary-zombies have cut the

and, frankly, no less distressing.

The proceedings unfold with the discovery on Brighton beach of a woman's arm, the hand on which has been pierced through the palm and a wedding ring put on after death (ah, the wonder of forensic science).

The action then shifts to Daniel, an introspective young man who moves his digs to a lonely house in Hove where he is the only tenant. The previous occupant, Wendy Bishop, a young girl whose presence still seems to be in residence, disappeared without so much as a forwarding address... the landlord – an enigmatic and articulate skinhead – tells him.

Locked in the throes of his Masters' degree dissertation, Daniel becomes drawn to a hidden section of the library where he discovers ancient volumes which contain the grisly details of a bizarre illness apparently caused by mephitic gases from the putrefaction of dead bodies. All the while, Daniel is hearing a woman's voice apparently leading him on to new discoveries and requesting even greater dedication to the furtherance of his studies.

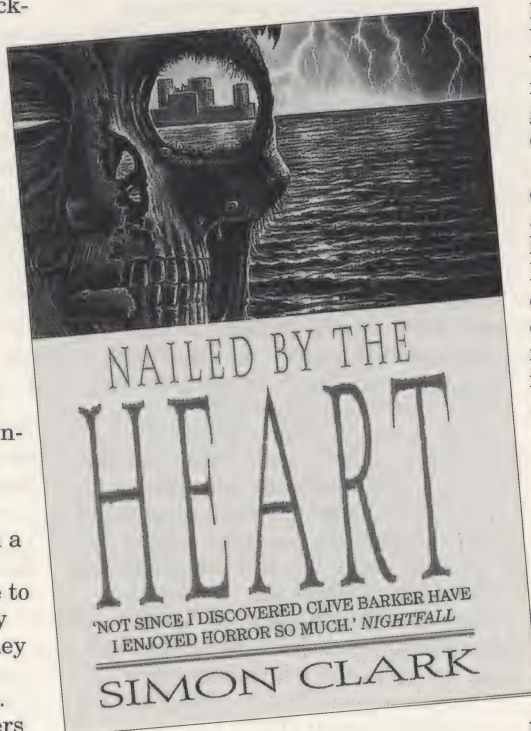
This additional dedication seems to consist of a rejection of food and an almost pathological distaste for the handling of money in any form. Daniel starts to slim... earnestly. He continues to deteriorate at a rate equal to that of the progress he makes on his thesis. Now he has found books on martyrdom and sainthood, which contain equally gory details of people – usually women – whose sense of Messianic zeal was so pronounced that they were not beneath driving nails through the palms of their own hands or drinking the pus of diseased beggars.

Through flashback and straightforward progression, the plot continues to thicken and, while Daniel's physical being does just the opposite, he sets about what is clearly a last-ditch attempt to resolve the mysteries of Wendy's disappearance, the severed arm, the inscrutable skinhead-landlord and the horrific ritualization of sainthood and martyrdom.

*Virgins and Martyrs* is a riveting read, recalling the great but unrelenting ghost stories of bygone days in a style which suggests the product of a collaboration of M. R. James, Jonathan Aycliffe, Stephen Gregory and Shirley Jackson. Exquisitely plotted and written, in a despairing, matter-of-fact fashion that surely compares with post-mortem and autopsy reports, it details a fanaticism of truly epic proportion.

Unreservedly recommended... though not if you're faint-hearted.

Pete Crowther



electricity, there's no telephone, guns have no effect and, with the already increasing power emanating from somewhere within the sea-fort, the Saf Dar are able to control those villagers who they have already killed. It seems like only a matter of time before the long-dead mercenaries gain entry and butcher everybody. Pretty hopeless... unless a way can be found to draw on the still-building Power... and do it quickly.

Despite a few minor grievances – and they are minor – *Nailed By The Heart* is a remarkable debut... exciting, well-paced, well-plotted, well-written and able to tell its story in fewer than 300 pages.

Simon Maginn's new novel, *Virgins and Martyrs* (Corgi, £4.99), is no less impressive than his debut, *Sheep*,



# Books Received

## April 1995

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Ash, Sarah. **Moths to a Flame.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-292-4, 296pp, C-format paperback, cover by Felix Mas, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; it's based on the story "Mothmusic" first published in *Interzone*.) No date shown: received in April 1995.

Baker, Nancy. **The Night Inside.** Signet/Creed, ISBN 0-45-118327-4, 312pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in Canada, 1993.) 4th May 1995.

Ballantyne, Jim. **The Torturer.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-05228-7, 239pp, A-format paperback, cover by Liam Gavin, £4.99. (Horror novel, first edition; "Jim Ballantyne" is a pseudonym for crime novelist Mark Timlin.) July 1995.

Barker, Clive. **Everville: The Second Book of the Art.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-647225-7, xi+640pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in 1994; reviewed by James Lovegrove in *Interzone* 92.) 24th April 1995.

Bear, Greg. **Legacy.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85516-8, 326pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a follow-up to *Eon* and *Eternity*.) June 1995.

Bear, Greg, with Martin Greenberg, eds. **New Legends.** Legend, ISBN 0-09-931881-4, 419pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Sf anthology, first edition; a smashing anthology of all-new material by Poul Anderson, Gregory Benford, Greg Egan, Geoffrey A. Landis, Ursula Le Guin, Paul J. McAuley, Mary Rosenblum, Robert Silverberg and others.) 4th May 1995.

Brooks, Terry. **The Tangle Box: Book Four, The Magic Kingdom of Landover.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38700-7, 356pp, A-format paperback, cover by Keith Parkinson, \$6.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1994.) 1st April 1995.

Brooks, Terry. **The Tangle Box.** "A Magic Kingdom of Landover novel." Legend, ISBN 0-09-925551-0, 341pp, A-format paperback, cover by Keith Parkinson, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1994.) 20th April 1995.

Brooks, Terry. **Witches' Brew: A Magic Kingdom of Landover Novel.** Legend, ISBN 0-09-960311-X, 304pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Parkinson, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) 4th May 1995.

Campbell-Butler, Ronald. **Fadar.** Janus [19 Nassau St., London W1N 7RE], ISBN 1-85756-173-2, 198pp, hardcover, £14.95. (Sf novel; first edition; the author is British, born 1935.) 5th June 1995.

Cole, Allan, and Chris Bunch. **The Warrior's Tale.** Legend, ISBN 0-09-946421-7, 487pp, A-format paperback, cover by Gnemio, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, published in the USA, 1994; sequel to *The Far Kingdoms*.) 18th May 1995.

Collins, Nancy A. **Paint It Black.** New English Library, ISBN 0-450-61010-1, 253pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA [?], 1995; sequel to *Sunglasses in the Dark*.) 18th May 1995.

Di Filippo, Paul. **The Steampunk Trilogy: Victoria, Hottentots, Walt and Emily.** Four Walls Eight Windows [39 West 14th St., #503, New York, NY 10011, USA], ISBN 1-56858-028-2, 352pp, hardcover, \$20. (Sf/fantasy collection, first edition; Di Filippo has been around for a decade or more as a short-story writer, but this is his debut book; it's nicely produced by a new literary press [previously known as the publishers of Octavia Butler's much-praised *Parable of the Sower*], and comes with cover commendations from Aldiss, Bishop, Gibson and Rucker; one of the novellas, "Walt and Emily," first appeared in *Interzone* in 1993; recommended to lovers of the slyly recursive.) No date shown: received in April 1995.

Dowling, Terry. **The Man Who Lost Red.** Illustrated by Shaun Tan. Foreword by Nick Stathopoulos. MirrorDance Books [PO Box 3542, Parramatta, NSW 2124, Australia], ISBN 0-646-21491-8, 112pp, small-press paperback, A\$9.95. (Sf collection, first edition; limited to 500 numbered copies; it contains two long tales: the title piece, which is a reprint from *Aphelion*, 1986, and "Scaring the Train," which is original to this booklet; there's also a full bibliography of all the author's published work to date.) No date shown: received in April 1995.

Dozois, Gardner, ed. **The Year's Best Science Fiction: Twelfth Annual Collection.** St Martin's

Press, ISBN 0-312-13221-2, xi+586pp, hardcover, \$26.95. (Sf anthology, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; it contains 20-odd stories by Stephen Baxter, Michael Bishop, Terry Bisson, Pat Cadigan, Greg Egan, Lisa Goldstein, Joe Haldeman, Nancy Kress, Ursula Le Guin, Maureen F. McHugh, Brian Stableford, George Turner, Howard Waldrop and others, including the usual allotment of two from *Interzone* – "Asylum" by Katharine Kerr and "Dead Space for the Unexpected" by Geoff Ryman.) July 1995.

Duncan, Dave. **The Hunters' Haunt.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38459-8, 295pp, A-format paperback, cover by Romas, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; it appears to be a sequel to *Reaver Road*, though the publishers don't explicitly say so; the author, who calls himself "D. J. Duncan" in the copyright statement, is of course the prolific Scots-Canadian writer, born 1933 – not the American sf novelist and screenwriter David Duncan, born 1913, who still lives but has fallen silent in recent decades.) 1st April 1995.

Egan, Greg. **Our Lady of Chernobyl.** Illustrated by Shaun Tan. MirrorDance Books [PO Box 3542, Parramatta, NSW 2124, Australia], ISBN 0-646-23230-4, 112pp, small-press paperback, A\$9.95. (Sf collection, first edition; limited to 500 numbered copies; hard on the heels of Egan's first hardcover collection, *Axiomatic* [see non-listing under *Permutation City*, last issue], comes this nicely produced small volume of four more stories; three of them, "Chaff," "Transition Dreams" and the title story, first appeared in *Interzone*; the fourth tale is "Beyond the Whistle Test," from *Analog*; there's also a full bibliography of all the author's published work to date; buy this attractive book while you can: Egan first editions will be valuable before very long.) No date shown: received in April 1995.

Feist, Raymond E. **Shadow of a Dark Queen.** "Volume One of the Serpentwar Saga." HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-648026-8, xi+560pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) 24th April 1995.

Fulton, Roger. **The Encyclopedia of TV Science Fiction.** "New updated edition." Boxtree/TV Times, ISBN 1-85283-953-8, 727pp, C-format paperback, £16.99. (Reference

guide to sf television programmes, first published in 1990; an impressively researched tome which gives full details of most sf plays, made-for-TV movies, serials and series shown on British television since the early 1950s; it's over 100 pages longer than the first edition [which was 596pp], and is newly illustrated with eight pages of photographs; it is also, amazingly enough, cheaper – the original version was priced at £17.95; but, big as this book is, there are still omissions: for example, Giles Cooper's lengthy two-part adaptation of Constantine FitzGibbon's novel *When the Kissing Had to Stop*, from 1962 [a very early example of a TV-sf "mini-series"?], and also his 140-minute blockbuster play *The Other Man*, from 1964 [novelized by himself for Panther Books in the same year]; in fact, Cooper, who died in 1966, could be claimed as a forgotten British TV-sf "auteur" [and no, there's no entry for him in Clute and Nicholls's *Encyclopedia of SF*].) 4th May 1995.

Gabaldon, Diana. **Voyager.** Arrow, ISBN 0-09-942851-2, 1059pp, A-format paperback, cover by Gary Blythe, £5.99. (Timeslip romance, first published in the USA, 1994; sequel to *Cross Stitch* and *Dragonfly in Amber*; the books in this series get bigger and bigger, which must be what the public wants: this volume alone is over 1,000 pages.) 3rd August 1995.

Gentle, Mary. **Left to His Own Devices.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-275-5, 378pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Avon, £5.99. (Sf/fantasy collection, first published in 1994.) 4th May 1995.

Goldberg, Lee, Randy Lofficier, Jean-Marc Lofficier and William Rabkin. **Science Fiction Filmmaking in the 1980s: Interviews with Actors, Directors, Producers and Writers.** Foreword by David McDonnell. McFarland [distributed in Britain by Shelwing Ltd, 4 Pleydell Gdns., Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN], ISBN 0-89950-918-5, xi+267pp, hardcover, £37.50. (Collection of interviews with sf film personnel; first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American edition with a British price added; most of the material is reprinted from magazines such as *Starlog* and *Twilight Zone*; interviewees include John Badham, James Cameron, Keir Dullea, Mel Gibson, David Lynch, Kyle MacLachlan, Richard Marquand, Nicholas Mayer, George Miller, Leonard Nimoy,



Dan O'Bannon, Wolfgang Petersen, Ridley Scott and William Shatner; a useful and enjoyable volume; recommended to all sf film enthusiasts.) 22nd June 1995.

Harbinson, W. A. **Genesis: Projekt Saucer, Book Three.** New English Library, ISBN 0-450-61752-1, 615pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Harrison, £5.99. (Sf/horror novel, first published in 1982; it's a UFO-conspiracy tale; "Harbinson is a combination of H. G. Wells and Frederick Forsyth," claims Colin Wilson on the back cover.) 18th May 1995.

Holligon, Sheila. **Nightrider.** Signet/Creed, ISBN 0-451-18330-4, 320pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first edition; a debut book by a new British writer who has previously published poetry; she appears to be a friend of novelist Philippa Gregory, to whom the book is dedicated [and who endorses it on the back cover].) 4th May 1995.

Janes, Phil. **I, Arnold: Round Three of the Galaxy Game.** Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-102-2, 280pp, C-format paperback, cover by Mick Posen, £8.99. (Humorous sf novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous hard-cover edition [not seen].) No date shown: received in April 1995.

Jones, Diana Wynne. **Everard's Ride.** Introduction by Patricia C. Wrede. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203, USA], ISBN 0-915368-63-3, ix+303pp, hardcover, cover by Ruth Sanderson, \$19.95. (Fantasy collection, first edition; there is a simultaneous signed, slipcased edition [not seen]; it contains two novellas, including the title piece, which are original to the book, plus an article on Tolkien and various reprinted short stories, taken mainly from Jones's earlier collections *Warlock at the Wheel* and *Hidden Turnings*; an attractive volume, recommended as a collectors' item to the many fans of this British author.) No date shown: received in April 1995.

Jones, Gwyneth. **North Wind.** Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-05920-6, 281pp, A-format paperback, cover by David Farren, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1994; sequel to *White Queen*; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 86.) 27th April 1995.

Koontz, Dean. **Strange Highways.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1333-X, 439pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror collection, first published in the USA [?], 1995; the title story is a previously unpublished short novel [150 pages]; the rest of the book consists of a dozen reprinted short stories, some of them revised, plus a nine-page "Notes

to the Reader" explaining their genesis.) 6th April 1995.

Leeds, Marc. **The Vonnegut Encyclopedia: An Authorized Compendium.** Foreword by Kurt Vonnegut. Greenwood Press [distributed in the UK by The Eurospan Group, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU], ISBN 0-313-29230-2, xvi+693pp, hardcover, £67.50. (Alphabetical who's who and what's what of the writings of this major American author, much of whose work is sf; first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American edition with a British price; it appears to be scrupulously compiled, exhaustive and exhausting – a more scholarly and upmarket version of those tedious "companions" to popular thriller writers, such as Tom Clancy and Robert Ludlum, which have appeared from other publishers in recent years.) Spring 1995.

McCaffrey, Anne. **Freedom's Landing.** "The first of the brilliant new Catteni sequence." Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-03740-5, 336pp, hardcover, cover by Romas, £15.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 1995.) 6th July 1995.

McKenzie, Nancy. **The High Queen: The Tale of Guinevere and King Arthur Continues.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-38245-5, 430pp, A-format paperback, cover by Jeff Barson, \$5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *The Child Queen*, which we never saw.) Late entry: 1st March publication, received in April 1995.

MacLeod, Ken. **The Star Fraction.** Legend, ISBN 0-09-955871-8, 341pp, hardcover, cover by Angus McKie, £10. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; a debut book by a new Scottish writer; the publishers are comparing it to the work of William Gibson, and the author's pal Iain Banks is quoted on the back cover to the effect that "this book takes near-future fiction into cyberian places it hasn't dared go before.") 21st September 1995.

May, Julian. **Diamond Mask: Volume II of The Galactic Milieu Trilogy.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-36248-9, 434pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mark Harrison, \$5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) Late entry: 1st March publication, received in April 1995.

Middleton, Haydn. **The King's Evil: Book I of the Mordred Cycle.** Little, Brown, ISBN 0-316-91367-7, 296pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author is best known previously for horror-tinged stuff, some of it published by Penguin – but has not written fantasy of this kind before, to the best of our knowledge.) 10th August 1995.

Modesitt, L. E., Jr. **The Order War.** "The magnificent new novel in the saga of Recluce." Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-330-1, 581pp, hardcover, cover by Darrell K. Sweet, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995; proof copy received; the fourth book in the "Recluce" series.) 6th July 1995.

Mustazza, Leonard, ed. **The Critical Response to Kurt Vonnegut.** "Critical Responses in Arts and Letters, Number 14." Greenwood Press [distributed in the UK by The Eurospan Group, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU], ISBN 0-313-26834-5, xxxiii+346pp, hardcover, £53.95. (Critical studies of this major American author, much of whose work is sf; first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American edition with a British price; it contains mainly reprinted reviews and essays from a wide variety of sources, mapping the reception of Vonnegut's novels through the decades; unfortunately, the various selections are not sourced and dated "on the page," so one has to keep flicking to the rear bibliography or to the copyright acknowledgments in order to discover their provenance, which can be very irritating; otherwise, this seems to be a good solid volume.) Spring 1995.

Pearlman, Daniel. **The Final Dream and Other Fictions.** Introduction by George Zebrowski. Permeable Press [47 Noe St., #4, San Francisco, CA 94114-1017, USA], ISBN 1-882633-05-9, 264pp, trade paperback, cover by Jill Tyler, \$13.95. (Sf collection, first edition; proof copy received; 11 quite chunky stories by a newish writer, some of them reprinted from magazines such as *Amazing* and anthology series such as *Synergy*.) 24th July 1995.

Rohmer, Sax. **The Fu-Manchu Omnibus, Volume I.** Allison & Busby, ISBN 0-7490-0271-9, 647pp, B-format paperback, cover by Mick Keates, £8.99. (Fantastic thriller omnibus, first edition; it contains three novels, *The Mystery of Dr Fu-Manchu*, *The Devil Doctor* and *The Si-Fan Mysteries*, first published in 1913, 1916 and 1917; not really sf or fantasy – but certainly the quintessence of pulp.) 24th April 1995.

Sanders, Joe, ed. **Science Fiction Fandom.** "Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy, Number 62." Greenwood Press [distributed in the UK by The Eurospan Group, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU], ISBN 0-313-23380-2, xii+293pp, hardcover, £49.50. (Essays on the sf fan community, fanzines, conventions, etc; first published in the USA, 1994; this is the American edition with a British price; it contains pieces by

F. M. Busby, Juanita and Robert Coulson, Roelof Goudriaan, Terry Jeeves, Richard A. Lupoff, Sandra Miesel, Sam Moskowitz, Harry Warner, Jr., Robert Weinberg and other people with impeccable fannish credentials; unfortunately, being a "fans-speak-out" book, it's all-too chatty in tone and lacking in academic rigour [for a more intellectual approach, of partial relevance to sf fandom, see *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media* ed. Lisa A. Lewis, Routledge, 1992]; this one makes enjoyable reading, though.) Late entry: late 1994 publication, received in April 1995.

Sawyer, Robert J. **The Terminal Experiment.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-63223-3, 328pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; the fourth novel by this Canadian author to be published in the UK in recent months, it was first serialized earlier this year in *Analog* under the more hackneyed title of "Hobson's Choice.") 18th May 1995.

Shaw, Bob. **A Load of Old BoSh: Serious Scientific Talks.** Becon Publications [75 Rosslyn Ave., Harold Wood, Essex RM3 0RG], ISBN 1-870824-34-2, 94pp, small-press paperback, cover by Sue Mason, £4.95 [\$8]. (Collection of humorous convention speeches by a well-known sf writer; first edition; most of the contents were previously published in two long-out-of-print pamphlets, *The Eastercon Speeches*, 1979, and *Serious Science*, 1985; proceeds go to the Royal National Institute for the Blind's "Talking Book" fund.) 14th April 1995.

Silverberg, Robert. **Hot Sky at Midnight.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-586-21108-X, 388pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 81.) 9th May 1995.

Smith, Cordwainer. **Norstrilia.** Introduction by Alan C. Elms. NESFA Press [PO Box 809, Framingham, MA 01701-0203, USA], ISBN 0-915368-61-7, xiii+249pp, hardcover, cover by John Berkey, \$20.95. (Sf novel, first published in 1975; earlier versions of the text appeared as two short paperback-original novels, *The Planet Buyer* and *The Underpeople*, in 1964 and 1968; this fine new edition "corrects a number of errors and omissions in the previous versions"; it also contains a 24-page appendix entitled "Variant Texts"; there is a quote from *Interzone* on the back cover, praising NESFA Press's earlier Cordwainer Smith volume, *The Rediscovery of Man*, but unfortunately they have misattributed it – Andy Robertson spoke those words of wisdom,



not John Clute.) *No date shown: received in April 1995.*

Spivack, Charlotte, and Roberta Lynne Staples. **The Company of Camelot: Arthurian Characters in Romance and Fantasy.** "Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy, Number 61." Greenwood Press [distributed in the UK by The Eurospan Group, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU], ISBN 0-313-27981-0, xiii+161pp, hardcover, £39.50. (Critical study of the ways in which characters like Merlin, Morgan le Fay and Mordred have been presented in recent Arthurian fiction; first published in the USA, 1994; this is the American edition with a British price.) *Spring 1995.*

Stableford, Brian. **Serpent's Blood: The First Book of Genesys.** Legend, ISBN 0-09-944331-7, 485pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Crisp, £15.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition; the first in a trilogy, this appears to be science fiction dressed up as epic fantasy – a cunning ploy, no doubt, of Legend editor John

Jarrold who is fond of telling us that fantasy currently outsells sf by four to one; let's hope it earns Brian Stableford the audience he deserves.) *18th May 1995.*

Sullivan, Tricia. **Lethe.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-553-56858-2, 401pp, A-format paperback, \$5.50. (Sf novel, first edition; the debut novel of a new American writer, born 1968; to be published in the UK as a Gollancz hardcover in the same month [see listing in our last issue].) *5th June 1995.*

Umland, Samuel J., ed. **Philip K. Dick: Contemporary Critical Interpretations.** "Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy, Number 63." Greenwood Press [distributed in the UK by The Eurospan Group, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU], ISBN 0-313-29295-7, viii+228pp, hardcover, £49.50. (Critical studies of the major American sf author who died in 1982; first published in the USA, 1995; this is the American edition with a British price; a useful collection of 11 academic essays, all but two of them previously

unpublished, concentrating on Dick's less-discussed works, ranging from the early short story "Impostor" through such mid-period novels as *The Crack in Space* and *Counter-Clock World* to the late "VALIS trilogy.") *Spring 1995.*

Weis, Margaret, and Don Perrin. **The Knights of the Black Earth: A Mag Force 7 Novel.** Roc, ISBN 0-451-45425-1, 420pp, hardcover, cover by Steve Youll, \$18.95. (Sf novel, first edition; the first in a new sequence, it appears to be a work of sub-*Star Wars* space-operatics set in the universe of Weis's earlier "Star of the Guardians" series; we've never seen a US Roc hardcover before: this one has actually been sent to us by Gollancz, who are planning a British edition on 17th August 1995.) *May 1995.*

Williams, A. Susan, and Richard Glyn Jones, eds. **The Penguin Book of Modern Fantasy by Women.** Introduction by Joanna Russ. Viking, ISBN 0-670-85907-9, xiv+560pp, hardcover, cover by Leonora Carrington, £17. (Fantasy anthology, first edition; mainly reprint stories by a host of names

one might expect: Aiken, Brackett, Butler, Carter, Charnas, du Maurier, Emshwiller, Gentle, Le Guin, Lee, McIntyre, Russ, Saxton, Tiptree, Tuttle, Wilhelm, etc; plus a few more surprising names, such as Leonora Carrington [writer as well as artist], Janet Frame, P. D. James, Muriel Spark, Fay Weldon, and so on; several of the stories are actually sf rather than fantasy, e.g. McCaffrey's "The Ship Who Sang" and Hilary Bailey's "The Fall of Frenchy Steiner"; a good anthology for the mainstream audience, but to the longtime sf/fantasy reader much of it may seem over-familiar; one of the less familiar stories, and the most recent in the book, Lucy Sussex's "Kay and Phil" [from the Australian anthology *Alien Shores*, 1994], turns out to be about a writer called Phil, who is working on a novel about the Nazis winning World War II, and his ghostly meeting with a writer called Kay who has already written one entitled *Swastika Night* – a notable piece of sf recursion.) *25th May 1995.*

## SPINOFFERY

*This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and sharecrops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used for the sake of brevity.*

Altman, Mark A., and Edward Gross. **Captains' Logs: Supplemental II.** "The Next Generation 7th Season Guidebook." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0938-8, 128pp, very large-format paperback, £9.99. (Illustrated guide to the final season of the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*; first published in the USA, 1995.) *27th April 1995.*

Brimmicombe-Wood, Lee. **Aliens: Colonial Marines Technical Manual.** Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0844-6, 160pp, very large-format paperback, £13.99. (Illustrated pseudo-technical guide to weapons, equipment, etc., featured in the *Aliens* sf films; first edition; although the movies are American, this book appears to be a wholly British production, originated by Boxtree.) *27th April 1995.*

Daley, Brian. **Star Wars: The Original Radio Drama.** Titan, ISBN 1-85286-628-4, 346pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Sf movie spinoff radio script, "based on characters and situations created by George Lucas"; first published in the USA as *Star Wars: The National Public Radio*

*Dramatization*, 1994; the British subtitle makes it sound as though the "Star Wars" mythology originated on radio, which of course it did not; unfortunately, one thing that Daley's quite informative introduction doesn't tell us is exactly when this radio serial [itself a form commonplace in Britain but exceedingly rare in America] was first broadcast – but the probable answer is 1980, three years after the film which inspired it.) *18th May 1995.*

Flynn, John L. **Dissecting Aliens: Terror in Space.** Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0863-2, 141pp, very large-format paperback, £9.99. (Illustrated guide to the making of the *Aliens* sf films and their spinoffs; first published in the USA, 1995; there's a disclaimer on the title page saying that the film production company 20th Century Fox had nothing to do with the book; with its concern to document independently the whole phenomenon of *Alien/Aliens*, this book is in fact more interesting than most examples of its type.) *27th April 1995.*

Johnson, Shane. **Star Wars Technical Journal.** Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0887-X, 190pp, very large-format paperback, £14.99. (Illustrated pseudo-technical guide to weapons, spacecraft, etc., featured in the *Star Wars* sf films; first published in the USA "in magazine format" in three parts, 1994; this material originates with *Starlog* magazine.) *6th April 1995.*

McKinney, Jack. **The Masters' Gambit.** "Robotech, Lost Generation #20." ISBN 0-345-38775-9, 261pp, A-format

paperback, \$5.99. (Sf novelization of complex derivation, based partly on the script of the animated *Robotech: The Movie* and partly on various comic-books; first edition; it's copyright "Harmony Gold U.S.A., Inc."; "Jack McKinney" is the shared pseudonym of two writers who have produced "numerous other works of mainstream and science fiction – novels, radio and television scripts... under various pseudonyms.") *1st April 1995.*

Siciliano, Sam. **The Angel of the Opera: Sherlock Holmes Meets the Phantom of the Opera.** Hale, ISBN 0-7090-5683-4, ix+256pp, hardcover, cover by Barbara Walton, £16.99. (Horror/fantasy sequel by another hand, based on characters created by Conan Doyle and Gaston Leroux; first published in the USA, 1994.) *28th April 1995.*

Slavicsek, Bill. **A Guide to the Star Wars Universe.** "Revised and expanded." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0859-4, 495pp, B-format paperback, £9.99. (Alphabetical concordance to things, persons, places, etc. in the *Star Wars* films and associated spinoff novels, comics, games, etc; first published in the USA, 1994; this is described as a second edition, but we're not told when the first appeared.) *27th April 1995.*

Storm, L. Elizabeth. **Pulitzer.** "Quantum Leap." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0677-X, 337pp, A-format paperback, cover by Colin Howard, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) *27th April 1995.*

Vornholt, John. **Babylon 5: Voices.** "Based on the series by J. Michael Straczynski." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0644-3, 246pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; this is the first of what presumably will be a series of *Babylon 5* novels; the author has previously written *Star Trek* spinoffs.) *27th April 1995.*

Watson, Ian. **Harlequin.** "Warhammer 40,000." Boxtree, ISBN 0-7522-0610-9, 246pp, A-format paperback, cover by Dave Gallagher, £4.99. (Shared-universe role-playing-game-inspired sf novel, first published in 1994; sequel to the same author's *Inquisitor*; these Watson novels are apparently the best-selling Games Workshop-sanctioned fictions to date, outstripping the related fantasy titles by "Brian Craig," "David Ferring," "Jack Yeovil," etc.) *27th April 1995.*

Wolverton, Dave. **The Courtship of Princess Leia.** "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40807-0, 374pp, A-format paperback, cover by Drew Struzan, £4.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1994.) *11th May 1995.*

Wynne, Frank. **The Making of Tank Girl.** Titan, ISBN 1-85286-621-7, 96pp, very large-format paperback, £7.99. (Copiously illustrated history of the making of the sf film *Tank Girl*; first edition; the movie was inspired by comic strips by Jamie Hewlett and Alan Martin which first appeared in *Deadline* magazine, from 1988.) *23rd June 1995.*



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**HARM'S WAY** — "What if Charles Dickens had written a space opera?" (*Locus*) — large paperback, £3.50. *The Hour of the Thin Ox* and *Other Voices*, paperbacks, £1.50 each. Prices include postage. Colin Greenland, 2a Ortygia House, 6 Lower Road, Harrow, Middx. HA2 0DA.

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**ALBEDO ONE** — Ireland's premier magazine of sf and speculative fiction. #7 now available: fiction, art showcase, reviews, letters. Kim Newman interviewed. £2.50 (£8 for four-issue subscription). 2 Post Road, Lusk, Co. Dublin, Ireland.

**WANTED:** *Earthsearch* by James Follett (BBC Publications, 1981/82), hardback in a nice clean jacket. J. Ingham, 41 Rosemary Avenue, Lower Earley, Reading RG6 5YQ. Tel. 01734-869071.

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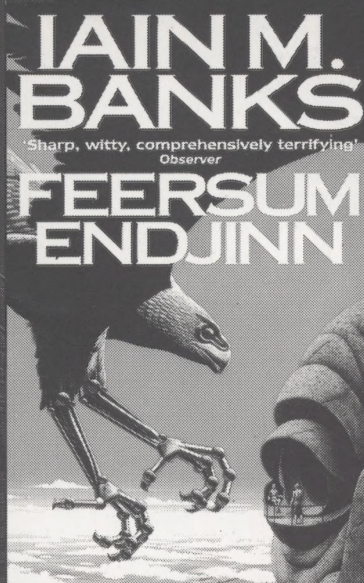
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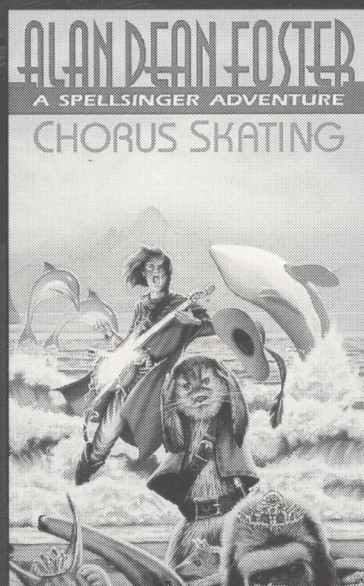
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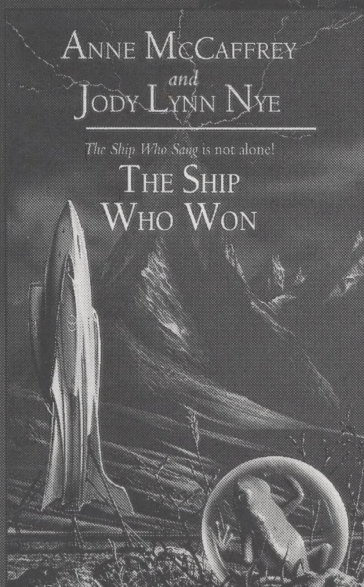
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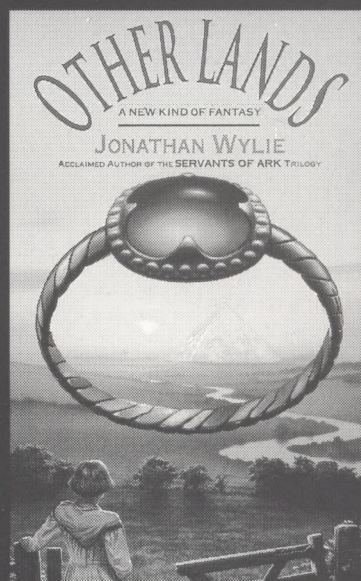
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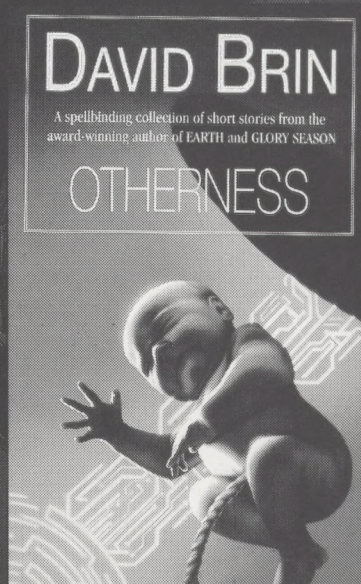
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